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OR,

Brazos Billy's Snap-Shot.

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COLORADO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BOY'S DARING,

A PAIR of eyes, keen and glittering, looked up from the depth of a bunch-grass hollow into the clear Texan sky.

A hawk which had pitched from a rocky pinnacle, some distance away, and made a vain stroke at a jack rabbit, was now flying

"BY THE GREAT STONE NOSE OF MY—" BILLY BEGAN; THEN BECAME SPEECHLESS.

slowly toward the hollow, having abandoned pursuit of the elusive jack.

On this hawk the glittering eyes were fixed.

Out from the folds of an Indian blanket came a bow. An arrow was hastily plucked from a quiver that lay in the grass, and, fitted to the bowstring, was held in readiness by fingers that did not quiver.

"I must have that fellow," was muttered, in a low tone.

The position was slightly shifted, and, then, had an observer been peering down from the adjacent slopes, he might have seen that the blanketed form was not that of an Indian.

The fingers that held the bow and the bowstring were those of a boy, or youth, whose face was undeniably white, in spite of the deep-dark tan which the fervid Texas sun, and the rasping Texas wind had imparted.

As the hawk drew nearer the youth rolled over on his back; then the bowstring twanged, and the hawk, pierced by the arrow, fell swiftly to the earth.

Casting the blanket aside, the boy ran to the big bird, which was still feebly fluttering, wrung its neck, and began to pull the largest feathers out of its wings and tail.

His manner indicated haste, also a desire to escape observation, for he now and then glanced keenly and hurriedly at the surrounding hills.

When he had possessed himself of a number of the feathers, he secured the arrow; and, wrapping himself in the discarded blanket, hastened out of the valley into a nearby gorge.

"What luck!" he ejaculated, perching a small mirror on a rocky angle. "I might have hunted for a hawk all day and not have got it. This one flew right into my hands."

He did not comment on the marvelous shot he had made.

Out from one of his pockets came a box of pigments, which he applied to his face; then he wove the hawk feathers into his abundant hair.

Having done this he drew the Indian blanket close about his shoulders and complacently surveyed himself in the mirror.

"By the great stone nose of my grandfather! Brazos Billy, your own mother wouldn't know you!"

He was so pleased with the metamorphosis that he chuckled in glee.

Rising, he took the glass from the rock and stowed it away again, with the pigments, and looked at the descending sun.

Night was at hand. Already the shadows were creeping from the hills out into the valleys, and Brazos Billy knew how short is the Texas twilight.

With much care he ascended to the top of one of the highest peaks in the immediate vicinity, and looked out across a rough and hilly country.

To the southward flowed the Rio Grande, and beyond it were the plains and mountains of Mexico.

But not toward these did the Brazos Boy turn his gaze. It settled on a thin, blue column of smoke, that came from a narrow defile not a mile from his point of observation.

"There yet!" he muttered.

His resolve had been taken long before; he had merely mounted the pinnacle to make sure the game was in sight.

By a roundabout way he descended, and at once set off afoot for the camp, whose smoke he had seen arising from the defile.

Darkness lay heavily all about before he gained the place. The camp-fire had been kicked asunder, as if through a fear

that its light might bring foes, and the sounds and movements seemed to indicate that camp was about to be broken.

Feathered head-dresses were to be seen nodding here and there by the light that still came from the embers, and Indian-like forms flitted about.

But these were not Indians, as Billy well knew, even before he heard them talking in unmistakable English.

He had sighted them some hours before—had seen that they were white men disguised as Indians; and, knowing that they were up to some sort of deviltry, he had disguised himself as an Indian, and was now in their camp to learn what they contemplated.

This was fraught with the gravest peril to the Brazos Boy, as he knew full well. These men probably were outlaws, who would not hesitate to shoot any spy caught sneaking in or around their camp.

But all the same Billy crept into the shadow of a rock and there waited and listened.

It was not a large party—only six or eight men, all in Indian guise.

"If Brace Benson's to home, he'll likely make a fight!" he heard one of the villains declare.

"Correct you air. Benson's said to be a fighter."

Billy's heart gave a great thump.

He did not know Brace Benson, but knew of him—knew where he lived, and that he was said to be a cattleman and a new-comer in that section.

There could be no doubt, apparently, that Benson's house was to be attacked and raided; possibly for booty, or perhaps to revenge some real or fancied wrong.

The men drew farther away, still talking, at which Billy rose from his position behind the rock that he might get nearer and hear the remainder of what was being said.

Almost instantly he was seen. A man turned toward him from a point near the fire.

Billy's heart hammered with a heavier beat. He believed he was discovered.

But the man's question reassured him:

"About ready, Jack?"

"Be ready in 'nuther minute!" Billy mumbled, shambling off, feeling every moment that his walk would betray him if his voice did not.

The questioner turned in another direction, apparently satisfied, and Billy sank down in the shadows, where he remained unseen and unsuspected, and a few minutes later the painted and feathered white men rode out of the defile.

CHAPTER II.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

"I must warn Brace Benson!" decided the Boy from Brazos, as he hurried out of the defile, after the departure of the disguised men.

He listened to the soft beat of the hoofs of the unshod ponies on the grass as the horsemen rode away, then he ran with fleet speed, taking a course at right angles.

Finally he reached an inclosed, rocky space, through which a stream once had flowed, and pushing aside some bushes at the upper end of the enclosure, a cavity was disclosed into which he crawled.

The bushes swung into place behind him, completely concealing the opening.

Straight ahead Brazos Billy went, turning to the right and then to the left. Then he stopped, scratched a match, and ignited the wick of a rude lamp that hung from the side of the wall.

The lamp-light revealed the interior, showing the place to be a cavern fitted up rudely as a place of abode. There was a bed of skins in the corner, a rough table

and some chairs, a sort of fireplace, and a number of pegs ranged along the walls. In addition, at one side, were a number of shelves made from cracker boxes.

But the Brazos Boy did not stop in the cavern. He hurried through another opening and came out in a grassy, enclosed space, where his horse was picketed and grazing.

Without removing his Indian disguises, he saddled and bridled the horse, and was soon after out on the prairie, riding at a rapid gait in the direction of Brace Benson's.

"If I can only reach there in time!" was his mental cry.

For more than an hour he rode hard and confidently; then he hesitatingly drew rein.

"I've gone astray!" he gasped.

He stared at the rocks about him. The ground was unfamiliar.

"I believe I'm too far South. Yes, I must be."

With this he turned toward the Northwest and rode on again, but only to draw rein once more when less than a mile had been passed over.

He was puzzled, and the more he tried to set himself right the more bewildered he grew.

Then he heard hoof-beats. A body of men was approaching.

There was a considerable patch of mesquite at hand, into which Billy crowded his horse, and then sat bolt upright, listening.

He was soon convinced that the horsemen were coming straight toward him. They were not far away, but, because of the mesquite and the darkness, he could not see them.

Bending forward in the saddle, he touched his horse on the nose, rubbing his hand up and down in a soothing way to keep the beast quiet. He feared it might neigh and betray him.

Then the voices of the men came to him, and he recognized them as the disguised outlaws who were hurrying to Benson's.

A desperate resolve flashed into the boy's mind. If he could not get to Brace Benson's ahead of these men, he might get there with them.

He bent lower in the saddle and remained as motionless as the bushes.

The bandits came trotting by, some of them almost within reaching distance; and Billy, growing bolder, drew his horse in at their heels, and joined them without attracting attention.

For almost another hour he rode on in that manner, his Indian blanket a complete protection.

Then Benson's was reached.

The house stood at the edge of a bunch of mesquite trees, and looked lonely and deserted.

But the outlaws were not willing to approach it. They seemed to think it was filled with defenders, who were likely to be wide awake.

So they began to ride in a circle about it, Indian fashion, to fire rifles at it, and to yell frightfully.

Still the house remained silent.

They drew together for a consultation, and Billy crowded close in with them to hear what was said.

"Brace Benson may be at home. He's a sly dog, you know, but we must rout him out."

This from the leader, who thereupon gave orders that burning arrows should be shot at the roof.

Billy drew back as the arrows began to fly, for the light they cast he feared might reveal him.

Three arrows stuck in the dry roof, which quickly began to burn.

Another arrow, hurtling like a rocket, and casting a red glow, struck the house at the side of a window, and Brazos Billy, who was looking at the house at the moment, was sure he saw the terrified face of a girl.

The arrow did not stick, but dropped to the ground, and the face was not seen again.

Billy looked about and decided that the face had been observed by no one else.

His heart thumped painfully, as the fire on the roof increased. Other burning arrows had found lodgment, and soon the whole roof was a mass of flame. Still no one came out of the house.

Brazos Billy could endure it no longer. The outlaws were again circling and yelling.

Taking advantage of this, the boy spy boldly rode toward the house, pulling the blanket close about his face.

It was his intention to kick the window in, enter the house, and find out what had become of the girl. He believed she had fallen in fright and would perish if left there.

But he did not reach the window.

He heard a harsh voice at his elbow; then felt himself jerked rudely backward out of the saddle.

He struck the ground heavily, and before he could quite get into his head what had happened to him, two of the painted outlaws were standing above him.

"Who are you? Played it pretty fine, eh?"

Further effort at concealment was useless. Billy sat up and looked them in the face.

"There's a girl in the house. Get her out. That's what I meant to do!"

Other outlaws had ridden up.

"Kick in the door!" the leader called.

"We'll find out if what he says is so. Tie him there, some of you."

The Brazos Boy, knowing it was useless to try to escape, submitted to be tied.

But all the while he kept his eyes on the door through which the men had gone.

"No girl in here!" was called out.

"That was all a blamed lie."

The leader leaped down and ran into the house. The fire was spreading and haste was necessary. He came out, accompanied by some men, who dragged with them a box.

They tore it open and Billy saw that it held a great quantity of silver coin.

He stared, wondering if the coins were counterfeit.

"Now tell me who you are!" the leader asked, advancing fiercely.

He did not understand how Billy had managed to join his party, and did not know the Boy from Brazos.

"Call me Brazos Billy, if you like."

"Where did you come from?"

"You were riding along and I joined you. That's all. You were playing Indian, and so was I. I thought maybe we might be friends."

The man looked him closely in the face by the light of the burning house.

"You're a keen one, and I guess you're lying."

"It might be of benefit to both of us if you'd let me join you."

Billy turned his face toward the house.

"Are you sure there's no girl in there? I saw one at the window."

"I reckon that's just a smart lie of yours. There ain't nobody in there. Come, what's your game?"

He dropped a hand to his revolver and his tone became threatening.

"It would pay us both if you'd let me join you," in a conciliatory tone.

"I'll let you join the boys that have gone over the divide! You'll be safer there and happier!"

There was a wolfish gleam in the outlaw's eyes which told Billy that he could expect no mercy.

The leader turned away and began to give orders for the distribution of the coin, and sent others into the house to renew the search.

But no other treasure boxes could be found.

It seemed possible the searching had been delayed too long, for the heat was now intense and there was danger that the roof might fall in.

When convinced that nothing but peril could come of a further delay, the leader gave an order and the entire party moved away toward the Northwest, carrying the Brazos Boy along. He was tied to his own horse, and his hands were bound behind his back.

He knew from the talk that they feared him because of the knowledge he had obtained, and that they meant to hold him a day or so, with a view of learning who and what he was; then they intended to shoot or hang him, and so put him beyond the power of harming them.

The night continued dark, and Billy was no sooner on his own horse than he began to plan a way of escape.

Softly he began to pull and tug at the cords that held his hands, and finally had the satisfaction of feeling them give under the strain.

The knots slipped a little, and he succeeded, after much painful effort, in drawing the cord off his wrists.

He kept his hands behind his back, however, that the attention of his captors might not be drawn to them.

When sure he was still unsuspected, he reached into an inner pocket and got out a small knife which he always kept there for emergencies.

With this he cut the rope that held him to the horse; then he again sat erect, with his hands behind him, biding his time.

It came in a few minutes.

Brushing through a clump of mesquite, Billy found opportunity to slide softly to the ground, where he lay until the horsemen had passed on; then he leaped up and stood listening.

Scarcely were the men clear of the mesquite when Billy's escape was discovered. A loud outcry resulted, and the Brazos Boy acted promptly.

He put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

A neigh, and the sound of hoofs instantly followed.

Billy's well-trained horse, hearing the call, had broken from the leader and now raced back to him.

Though the horse was pursued, it reached Billy's side, and a moment later the brave Brazos Boy was on its back and flying from danger.

The cries grew louder and revolvers began to crack as the outlaws took in the situation.

A lively chase resulted, but Brazos Billy's horse was a fleet-foot, and was soon able to distance pursuit.

CHAPTER III.

A PUZZLING SIGHT.

Brazos Billy was back in the cavern.

From one of the shelves he took a coat, restoring to the shelf the blanket he had worn.

Then he removed the feathers from his hair and the paint from his hands, setting up the mirror in front of him to make sure the work was properly done.

"Bob hasn't been here," glancing about as he completed his ablutions. "Well, I've no time to waste."

Having got rid of his Indian disguise, he

brought out his horse, and again rode in the direction of Brace Benson's. The time was broad day.

For three hours he rode hard, then drew in on the bridle at the top of a high knoll and stared across the intervening valley.

All that remained of Benson's house was a heap of smoking and glowing embers.

What he stared at, though, was a young woman, who was poking, with a long pole, into the embers, and frenziedly sweeping the ashes aside with a shovel, as if she sought something.

Her movements gave Brazos Billy a queer thrill, that had in it a touch of horror. The thought flashed across him that she was searching for the burned remains of her uncle, for he suspected she was Brace Benson's niece. He was sure she was the girl he had seen at the window.

He approached the house by a round-about way, tied the horse to a mesquite bush, and then, on foot, went forward, concealing himself from the girl's observation by keeping a fringe of mesquite bushes between himself and her.

The fringe of mesquite came close up to the house. He was about to step out and reveal himself, when he saw that which caused him to catch his breath and remain silent.

She had cleared away a small area at one corner with the shovel, and had been digging in the ground at that point. Now he saw her stoop and drag out of the ground a box so heavy that her strength was hardly equal to the task.

She tugged and strained at the load, resting now and then, and then, having drawn the box out of its pit, she lifted the lid, as if to inspect its contents and make sure they were uninjured by the fire.

These contents were plainly visible to the staring eyes of Brazos Billy.

The box contained a great quantity of gold and silver coin.

He was fairly stupefied by what he saw, remembering the other box taken out of the house.

He was in that country looking for counterfeit money and counterfeiters, yet he was loth to believe that Brace Benson and this girl were guilty of the crime of counterfeiting.

He was not left long to debate on a course of action. The girl heard his involuntary movement, and, closing the lid of the box with a snap, stared into the mesquite.

At this Brazos Billy showed himself, lifting his hat with a low bow as he approached the fire.

"I hope I am not intruding," he apologized. "I saw the fire, and thought I might be of service. Can I help you in any way? Is Mr.—"

He hesitated, remembering he had fancied she might be poking in the ashes for Brace Benson's remains.

His keen eyes noted the shiver that shook her.

"My uncle is gone," she said. "He was forced to leave me alone yesterday. A band of Indians came last night and set the house afire."

She was panting with excitement.

"And you?"

"Uncle had prepared for something of the kind. There is a well-like opening in the house, or was, and a tunnel leads from it out yonder. When they surrounded the house and began to yell, I ran into that tunnel, just as Mr. Benson—my uncle—had told me to do."

"But, oh! it was dreadful! It was terrible! I thought I should die in there. And it was almost like death. They set the house afire and the smoke and the heat came to the tunnel in a way to almost suffocate me. I could hardly breathe!"

"If the tunnel had not been a long one—"

it reaches away out there—with a circular place at the end—I am sure I should have died.

"Then they went away, and I pushed aside the board, which you may see out there in the grass, and looked around. I was afraid to poke out my head, and I didn't, until I was sure they were gone!"

"Do you mind my looking at the place?" questioned Billy, glancing toward the indicated board.

"Not at all," she said, and set out to accompany him.

The board had been set in the ground like the cover of a coal-hole or well, with earth strewn above it, so that it had not been visible.

A feeling of mystery was growing on him. Was this hole, with the tunnel leading to it from the house, the provision of a wise man guarding against the perils of the future, or was it suggestive of the deceit of crime? Did it have any connection with the gold and silver coin in that box? What was the meaning of that gold and silver coin anyway? Was it counterfeit or genuine?

His thoughts seemed almost sacrilegious when they concerned her and connected her with wrong-doing of any character, and he violently thrust them aside.

He assured himself that Lizzie Benson, the handsome niece of Brace Benson, was as honest and pure a young woman as there was in the State.

"You wouldn't mind if I dropped down into that hole and took a look at it?" he asked, somewhat timidly.

"Not at all!" she assured.

But he discovered nothing of importance when he had dropped into the hole. There were some blankets in it, and signs of occupancy, but that was all.

He climbed out and walked with her back to the fire.

She expressed fears as to the safety of her uncle, and asked if he would not ride in search of him.

"And you say he is where?"

"He said he was going to John Tanner's, ten miles down the river."

Brazos Billy knew well the location of Tanner's ranch, and he knew well, too, that John Tanner was suspected of various shady transactions.

"I'll be glad to ride down there for you. But won't you be afraid to stay here alone?"

"Not at all," she asserted.

"But those men—those Indians may come back."

"If they do I'll run into the tunnel. But they'll not come back, for they think there's nothing to come back for."

Brazos Billy thought he saw her glance anxiously toward the box.

He would have been pleased to remain longer, but he brought up his horse, and, bidding her good-by, rode down the river toward Tanner's.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNPLEASANT POSITION.

"By the great stone nose of my—"

Brazos Billy, clattering along over the short mesquite grass, drew so hard on the rein that he fairly threw his horse on its haunches.

Around him, crowding forward out of the bushes, rode a dozen men, hemming him in.

"Surrender!" called out a harsh voice, and one of the horsemen came toward him, swinging a sword.

"You are making a mighty big mistake," he grumbled, letting the reins drop on his horse's neck and offering no resistance. "I'm not what you think me. I'm only an honest chap, on my way to a ranch down the river."

"You can tell that to the captain, if you want to. I don't believe it. You're one of Colino's scoundrels. They've been raiding through here, and burned a ranch house last night."

"I've just come from that ranch house," Billy stated. "It was Brace Benson's house, and I was riding to Tanner's ranch at the request of Benson's niece."

He listened closely to the voice of the officer with the sword, whom he soon afterward heard addressed as Lieutenant Crosscut, with the unpleasant feeling growing on him that he had heard that voice before—that he had heard it in the camp of the disguised white men, when they were setting out to destroy Benson's house.

The soldiers were giving earnest heed to his story, which he made as full as possible, acquainting them with all the facts that had come into his possession.

"You can tell that to the captain," Lieutenant Crosscut again sneered, when Brazos Billy concluded.

"You're not going to hold me?" Billy gasped.

"We didn't capture you just for fun. Of course we will hold you."

"But Brace Benson! And the girl up there at the burned house!"

"She'll be looked after," said Crosscut. "And now, what can you tell us about Juan Colino?"

Brazos Billy was not able to tell them anything especially interesting concerning Juan Colino more than they knew.

All were acquainted with the same facts: Juan Colino was known far and near on the Rio Grande border as Colino, the Firebrand. He had at his heels a band of rough-riders, who were cut-throats, assassins and thieves, and he had made himself so detested and notorious that he was hunted by American and Mexican soldiers alike, and chased to and fro, from one side of the border to the other, as if he and his men were coyotes, to be run down and destroyed without mercy.

"I'm no more one of Juan Colino's men than you are," Billy replied.

"You'd better be careful how you reply to my questions."

"I'm only stating facts, sir. I know nothing about Juan Colino. I am not one of his band."

"Of course we wouldn't expect you to confess it. We have been after Colino's men, and we have pretty good reason to believe that you are one of them. So you'll go along with us, without any nonsense, or we'll clap you in irons."

"How long will I be held, probably?" Billy questioned, striving to control his rage. "Benson must be notified at Tanner's ranch of what's happened."

"Move along there, will you?" Crosscut commanded. "We'll attend to that matter. I'm sure you're lying, but we'll look into it."

The blood of Brazos Billy began fairly to boil.

But he saw how foolish it would be to attempt any resistance, or to hurl a counter taunt at the sneering lieutenant, and so he suffered himself to be borne along in the company of the soldiers without further protest.

The distance to be traveled was farther than Billy anticipated.

Arriving there, Billy was conducted before Captain Marchmont, the commander, who had his headquarters in a big tent pitched near the center of the camp, and there Crosscut made his accusations.

Billy denied them earnestly, and appealed to Marchmont to be released.

Marchmont was a different sort of man from Crosscut, but he was inclined to believe Crosscut's story and to disbelieve Billy's.

Marchmont had brought his men into

that particular locality because he had information tending to make him think the headquarters of Colino, the Firebrand, was somewhere in the surrounding hills.

"I'm sorry we can't let you go," he said, when he had patiently heard Billy and the lieutenant through. "You hardly look like one of Colino's men, though some of them are said to be beardless boys. Still, I'll have to hold you until the thing can be further investigated."

Billy began to protest, but it availed him nothing, and he was led away to a guard tent, where he was confined.

CHAPTER V.

RIO GRANDE BOB.

Brazos Billy was passing a sleepless night.

One great source of uneasiness was the fact that he had been kept from finding Lizzie Benson's uncle and sending him to her.

Now he walked up and down in the narrow confines of the tent, a prey to the most unpleasant reflections.

He feared the result of the arrest, for he felt that he was under arrest.

No man was so hated and feared on the border as Colino, the Firebrand, and to be suspected as one of Colino's men was indeed a very serious thing.

Vainly he wondered what the outcome would be. There was a way, he fancied, by which he might establish his innocence, but he did not wish to resort to it.

Finally he lay down on the ground. He was tired, but he did not desire to sleep. The measured steps of the guard, walking up and down in front of the tent were not reassuring or soothing.

Billy had not lain there long when his quick ear detected a singular sound.

The noise did not draw the attention of the guard. Within and without the tent darkness reigned.

Though he could see nothing, he was satisfied that a human form had slipped through the tent wall and was crouching not a yard from him.

Then came the whispered words:

"You here, Brazos Billy?"

The voice was familiar. It was that of Billy's pard, Rio Grande Rob—or Bob Roundtree.

"Right side up," Billy whispered back. "What you doing here, Bob?"

"Come for you."

"What if I don't want to go?"

"You've got to," and Roundtree's clutch tightened. "I'm onto the whole thing, Billy. You'll be killed—murdered, if you stay hyer. I've follered you, and I've heard that lieutenant talking in his tent to a villain that's as bad as he is—and I say, if you stay hyer you'll be done up!"

"But I can establish my innocence, if I'm put to it."

"You're goin' to come with me, because I know it's the best thing fer you. We'll argify about it after you git out o' hyer. Now, let's slide!"

Brazos Billy had had many chances to test the wisdom of Rio Grande Rob, and, though he was loth to run from these enemies, for the act apparently branded him with guilt, he permitted Roundtree to lead him through the slit in the wall of the tent.

Once outside, they flattened themselves on the ground and slipped away through the darkness like lizards, finding little difficulty in evading the sentries.

"Now you will explain, please," said Billy, when they were beyond earshot of the camp and reasonably safe. "How did you know where I was?"

"I wasn't a thousand yards away from you when you was captured. You and the soldiers rode right by me, and I heard you and that Lieutenant Crosscut talkin'."

"You may bet, then, that I knowed somethin' was crooked, and I follered you up as fast as I knew how, not knowin' jest what I could do, but bound to be ready to help you if the chance come!"

"Then you was put in that tent. I seen you go in there, and I seen Crosscut, as they calls him, go into his tent; and to-night I sneaked up and puts my head under Crosscut's tent, and hears what he has to say."

"There was another feller in Crosscut's tent, and pretty soon they begun to talk about you, and Crosscut, he says, to this other feller, 'We've got that there young chap dead to rights, and he don't never git out o' this place alive, he don't!'"

"And the way he gritted his teeth an' looked black in the face and spit cotton an' fire when he said it made me know that he meant it, and that you was goin' to have a rocky road to travel if you staid hyer."

"And so I says to myself, says I, 'that there young pard o' mine ain't agoin' fer to stay in that there tent any longer than I kin git him out, he haint!'"

"And so I done it, and hyer we air!"

"And they'll think I'm one of Colino's men now, sure," Billy objected.

"Let 'em think! We're not hyer to keer a straw what they think. So long as you're not one of Colino's men and you keep out of their clutches, their idees haint agoin' to hurt you."

Billy was not sure that Roundtree had acted wholly the part of wisdom in releasing him from the tent, yet he was not inclined to grumble.

He and Bob Roundtree were on the Rio Grande border at that time looking for certain criminals, and posing as cattlemen and prospective purchasers, thus giving them an excuse for visiting various ranches.

It was pretty certain that a great amount of spurious coin was being manufactured in that section. Some thought it the work of Colino's men, while others believed that some unsuspected ranchman was the guilty party. It was the business of Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree to learn the truth and to bring the criminal or criminals to speedy justice.

Brazos Billy had been especially commissioned and sent there as a member of the Secret Service force, and Bob Roundtree was his faithful assistant.

He now followed Roundtree, who struck out into the prairie straight away from the camp, and they soon found Billy's horse, picketed by his pard.

"Glad to see him, air ye?" Roundtree questioned, with a pleased chuckle. "I onct knowed a feller that hadn't seen his daddy fer more'n twenty years—"

"And they asked him that question, did they? Well, they were about as foolish as you!"

"If you'll hop up and ride now," Roundtree suggested. "I've got rags on his feet."

Billy stooped and discovered that the feet of the horse had been muffled in gunny sacks that Roundtree had boldly taken from the camp.

"We'll take turns at riding," said Billy, swinging into the saddle. "Come along, now, for the first heat. You're longer-legged and the best walker. I'm going to Brace Benson's. I want to see what's become of that girl."

Then, as they passed on out from the valley seeking to hide their trail, Brazos Billy acquainted Bob Roundtree with the many things that had happened since they had last met.

The story of the box of coin greatly interested Roundtree.

"I'll bet it was counterfeit!" he ejaculated. "Likely that Brace Benson is the

very king bee we're after! And that girl—"

"I'm sure she's not guilty, at any rate," Brazos Billy interposed.

"Mebbe not!" Roundtree admitted.

But when, after the coming of daylight, they reached the site of Brace Benson's home, it began to seem that Roundtree's suspicions might be correct, after all, and the girl not so innocent as Billy had fancied.

Lizzie Benson and the box with the coin were both gone.

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

Brazos Billy was undeniably puzzled, and he began an immediate examination of the ashes and cinders, as well as a survey of the surroundings, in an effort to get at the facts.

It was likely, he thought, that Brace Benson had returned from Tanner's ranch and had gone away with the girl and the money.

Was it counterfeit money, though? If not, where had such a quantity of coin come from?

Brace Benson was said to be comparatively a new-comer in the country, with only a few cattle and without much acquaintance or standing among the cattlemen of the Rio Grande.

Therefore, under all the circumstances, nothing seemed more probable than that Benson was a counterfeiter or in league with counterfeiters.

"It was not the work of Colino, the Firebrand," Brazos Billy declared to his pard, when he had closely scrutinized the hoof-prints in the surrounding grass. "I have been thinking that Colino's men were the chaps that burned this house, but they weren't. One would think they were Indians, but I know they were not Indians."

"Who then?" questioned Roundtree.

"That's for us to find out! Yes, and by the great stone nose of my venerable grandpappy, we will find out. You remember what I said to you about me thinking Crosscut's voice was like the voice of one of the white men disguised as Indians?"

"Yep!"

"Do you suppose he could have been in both places? Been the leader of those pretended Indians and of the soldiers, too?"

"I onct knowed a feller that asked so many questions that he fogged his brain and never got over it," Roundtree observed, in a way that was most unsatisfactory. "I tell you I don't know nothin', and that's the truth. The wise man is the feller that don't know nothin', and knows he don't know nothin'; the fool is the chap that don't know nothin', and thinks he knows it all."

With this observation Bob Roundtree began to poke his toes into the ashes at the point where the coin-box had been resurrected. He was hoping he might come on some of the coin pieces and so be able to tell if the money was counterfeit or genuine.

"What are these tracks?" Billy suddenly called out. "Here are the tracks of a man and the tracks of a girl."

Roundtree hurried to Billy's side and assisted him in an inspection of the trail.

It seemed to settle the point that Benson had returned and accompanied the girl from the ruins, and with this as a conclusion, they poked again among the ashes until the came to the well-like aperture through which the girl had descended into the tunnel when the house was on fire.

With their curiosity increased, they de-

scended into the tunnel, which was littered with charred wood and ashes, and made their way to the point where Lizzie Benson had concealed herself in terror when the house was on fire and the supposed Indians were howling like mad around it.

They found the place still warm, almost to stifling, though the opened hole on the prairie let in the light and the air. Still, it was so dark that Roundtree struck a match now and then to assist him in the search.

They went about, kicking into the dirt and stabbing their knives into the walls, in the hope that another box of coin might be found, or at least something that would throw more light on the mystery of the box.

At length Brazos Billy's foot turned up a silver half-dollar.

"By the great stone nose of my grandpappy, it's counterfeit!" he cried, as he held it beneath the match that Roundtree had lighted.

"Not a doubt of it!" Roundtree agreed, after a close scrutiny. "And that shows, don't it, that Brace Benson is a counterfeiter, and that the girl is a counterfeiter, too?"

Brazos Billy was silent. He could not combat this reasoning.

"It's a great pity," Roundtree continued, "that you didn't hang to that box, or at least make her let you see the stuff in it. But I know 'twas counterfeit, jist the same!"

Billy pocketed the counterfeit half-dollar, and they renewed the search, leaving nothing unexamined.

Into a bundle of old clothes Brazos Billy thrust his foot and fell back with a scared outcry.

And no wonder. His foot had touched a human form.

The clothes were tossed aside, and a man sprang up, drawing a revolver from his hip pocket.

Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree dropped back and faced him, Roundtree drawing his heavy cowboy pistol and leveling it with remarkable celerity.

"Who are you?" Brazos Billy demanded. "What are you doing here and why were you hiding?"

"Take it easy, youngster," came in the cool voice of the stranger. "Strikes me I might ask what you are doing here?"

"Answer my question!" Billy commanded, while Bob Roundtree nervously fingered the big pistol.

"I suppose I'll have to stand your impudence, which I wouldn't do under any other circumstances," the fellow growled. "My story is straight enough. I'm a cowboy of the X-Ranch, and I come hyer to see Brace Benson."

"I found his house burned, and him gone or dead, and then, hearin' you comin', an' not knowin' jes' how to take ye, I crept in hyer, and then, when ye follered me, I slipped under them old clothes."

An evil, evasive look rested on his face as he made this statement, convincing them he was not speaking truthfully.

In addition, the man's very physiognomy was against him. His features were those of a criminal.

"You are lyin', you dog!" declared Bob Roundtree, with more force than politeness.

Hardly had the words left Roundtree's lips when the man flew at him like a tiger, impelled by uncontrollable rage.

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Roundtree, dropping the big revolver and clutching the fellow by the throat. "You don't come no monkey business on your Uncle Henry."

Roundtree was tall and powerful, a typical Texan, and he bent the man back-

ward, crowding him against the wall with choking fingers, and hissing:

"I've a notion to squeeze your black heart out for that! And I'll do it, too, now, if you don't tell the truth! You're no cowboy of the X— Ranch. What's your name, hey?"

"My name's Sam Adair," the fellow whined, submissively. "I'm one of the X— men, jest as I've told you, and I come hyer jest as I told ye. That's the truth, and if you kill me I can't say nothin' else."

"Better let him go, hadn't we?" questioned Brazos Billy.

"I don't know as we can do anything else," Roundtree grumbled. "Wish't we could. I feel it in my bones, though, that we'll be sorry we didn't hold him, er kill 'im!"

"I see you still don't believe me. I'm sorry that you don't! But I've done nothing, and I don't know what you mean by holding me."

His manner had entirely changed. It bordered on the cringing.

"We'll let you go," said Roundtree, with an air of superior condescension.

Sam Adair, wildly anxious to get away, leaped out of the hole and into the shelter of the mesquite.

CHAPTER VII.

COLINO, THE FIREBRAND.

Out in the mesquite, less than a half-mile from the site of Benson's house, the man calling himself Sam Adair had a horse hitched, which he mounted and galloped furiously away.

"You'll see me again," he threatened, shaking his fist. "And you'll tremble when you know who I am. Colino, the Firebrand, don't take such insults without striking back."

If Brazos Billy and his pard had had the least idea that the man whom they had in their power was the notorious leader of the Firebrands they certainly would not have let him go.

Colino did not ride a mile till he altered his course, taking advantage of a rocky slope, as he did so, and rode in the direction of a range of low hills.

Again and again he changed his path, seeking flintier and flintier slopes, and finally clattered, with much noise, through a rocky draw, and into a valley that was small and ringed in by rocky walls.

"Halt! Halt!" rang out sharply, accompanied by the clicking of a rifle lock.

A wolfish smile came to the face of Juan Colino. He drew in his horse with a jerk and turned to the speaker, who was emerging from his post behind a boulder.

"Ever watchful, my good David!" Colino pleasantly commented. "Of course, though, the way I came, you couldn't help hearing me. See that you're always as ready."

"Aye, that I will. What news?"

He was a tattered scoundrel, with a leering face that showed the influence of drink. His tattered condition was emphasized by the fine rifle he held in his hands. It was a Winchester, of the latest pattern, and its polished barrel glittered like silver.

"No news. All well in the camp?"

"All well!" replied the sentry.

Then Colino trotted on, turning almost immediately an angle that brought into view a number of tents, some horses, two or three camp-fires, and a dozen men.

The men had heard his coming, and were ready to greet him, swarming forward with words of welcome.

Colino dismounted, giving the horse in charge of one of the men, and entered one of the houses, whither he was followed by his lieutenants.

His brow blackened as he looked into the face of his officers, after the door had closed.

"There are two men I want the rough riders to capture!" he declared, harshly and gratingly. "They are now at Benson's—or where Benson's house was, and I want them captured and brought here. Then I will teach the dogs a lesson they will never forget!"

Having said this much he went into details and told of his treatment at the hands of Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree, and fairly writhed under the bitter memory.

CHAPTER VIII.

SURPRISED.

"A handy little hole, back hyer!"

The fringe of bushes was drawn aside and a frowsy head was thrust into Brazos Billy's cave house. Needless to say, Brazos Billy was away.

"'Twouldn't be a purty place to git trapped in, though."

The head was drawn back and its owner closely surveyed the surrounding country, as he had already done a dozen times.

Night was approaching.

"It's me that wants to ketch the boy, not him ketch me."

The teeth were shown in a grin. Then the man, satisfied the way was clear, crept into the cavern and stared about him.

He was one of Colino's Firebrands, anxious to do Colino's bidding and gain the favor of his redoubtable chief.

He had been squatting on the adjacent hillside late that afternoon, when, by chance, he saw Brazos Billy leave the cavern, and, recalling the words uttered by his chief, he reflected that if he could capture this boy it would be the biggest kind of a feather in his hat.

"Um! That hits me jes' whur' I live."

Some jerked venison was on the wall and some crackers in a box. There was also water in a black jug.

"If it was only red likker, now!" sniffing suspiciously at the jug's contents.

He ate greedily of the crackers and venison, swallowed quantities of the water, and then reclined lazily on a couch of skins.

He looked very much as a tramp would look who had invaded some city residence, and coiled himself up on a lounge. His face was most unprepossessing, his clothing rags and tatters.

He felt so comfortable that he began to be drowsy and to fear he might fall asleep, and was thinking of changing his position, when he heard the clatter of a horse's feet.

The sounds electrified him. All the laziness vanished.

Clutching a point of rocks just above his head, he swung up out of sight onto a shelf that here ran along the side of the cave.

He found himself in Brazos Billy's storehouse, and saw about him more blankets and skins and a box or two that might have contained food supplies.

Brazos Billy did not immediately enter the cave, and this gave the trampish fellow time to swing down again and make an effort at removing the signs of his presence.

He had been so careless, though, that he could not get rid of all the cracker crumbs, and there was one wet place where he had let some of the water fall from the jug.

Brazos Billy, entering the cavern, drove him again to the shelf.

It was growing dark in the cave, and Brazos Billy struck a match and lit the rude lamp that swung against the wall.

By its light he glanced about, then of his pard, when his gaze fell on the wall place and on some cracker crumbs, causing him to start.

The outlaw on the shelf saw the involuntary movement, and, knowing discovery was inevitable, grew desperately bold.

Brazos Billy stood just beneath him, within reach of his long arms.

Reaching down he softly pulled the revolvers from Billy's belt.

Billy felt the movement and turned quickly, but not so quickly that the removal of the weapons was prevented.

He fairly reeled when he saw the outlaw on the shelf, poking the revolvers at him and chuckling. He felt he was trapped.

"Take it easy, podner!" the outlaw grinned. "I jest dropped into your hotel hyer a while ago. You keep good chuck and you keep good beds. I hopes you'll not spile my good opinion of you, now, by actin' ugly. You might's well throw up yer hands fust as last!"

"You've got the drop on me," Billy admitted. "I always make it a rule to agree with the man who has that. So, if you'll be kind enough to tell me what you want."

"Well, you're goin' with me. Colino wants to see you."

"You're one of Colino's men, eh?"

"That's too much like callin' hard names, now, ain't it?" with a leering grin. "Are you ready to go 'long wi' me?"

He clicked the revolver menacingly, keeping Billy covered by it.

Brazos Billy was doing some rapid thinking.

"Yes, I'll go with you. Not because I want to, but because I have to."

"Correct you air."

"First let me get some money out of this box. Colino likes money, I know, and mebbe he'll treat me better if I take him a present."

The man's eyes kindled avariciously.

The box was at Billy's feet, and before the outlaw could make up his mind whether or not to let him move, the box was open and Billy was feeling in it.

"No tricks, now."

"You've got me covered, hain't you?"

"Jest the same, no tricks, now, mind ye!"

He lifted the revolver threateningly, holding it up in his right hand.

Then a bowstring twanged, and the outlaw gave a howl of pain and astonishment.

Brazos Billy had seized his Indian bow and arrow, that lay in the box, and had sent the arrow through the outlaw's wrist.

The revolver dropped with a clatter to the rocks, and was exploded, and another yell came from the outlaw.

His hand remained uplifted, and Brazos Billy saw that the arrow head had gone through it, and, clinging fast to an interstice of the rocks, held the hand there.

The exploding revolver rolled at Billy's feet.

Then the tables were turned.

"I ought to shoot you down like a dog!"

Brazos Billy thrust the muzzle of the pistol against the man's foot, as if tempted to send a ball whizzing through his body.

By a great effort the man tore his hand loose; and then, overpowered by the touch of the cold steel, he rolled, in a gasping and bewildered heap, to the ground.

Before he could recover or get out another weapon, Billy had the loop of a strong rope about his wrists, and bound him fast.

He pulled the outlaw to a sitting posture, took down the lamp and flashed it in in his face.

"If Colino is as much of a scoundrel as you look to be, I don't wonder that he's gained a hard name. Now, tell me where he is and when you saw him last."

The man, with his hands tied, cowered against a rock. Billy had taken from him every weapon that could be found.

"Speak up!" Billy commanded.

For answer the man lifted his head, seemed to listen intently for a moment, and then uttered the peculiar "chr-r" of the prairie dog owl.

Brazos Billy had himself heard nothing, but now there came a similar "chr-r" out of the darkness.

The outlaw drew himself up to send forth another call, when Brazos Billy smote him furiously in the mouth.

"Keep your tongue in your head, will you? Do that again and I'll shoot you!"

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE HANDS OF COLINO'S MEN.

It had taken nerve and courage for the outlaw to utter that "chr-r," for the arrow wound in his hand was agonizingly painful. Billy had wrapped a cloth about it, but the flow of blood was not stopped.

The man fell backward as Billy struck him, and then cowered, fearing a repetition of the blow.

However, before Brazos Billy could do more, dark forms sprang through the opening and revolver muzzles confronted him.

"Lift a finger, and we'll make a sieve out of you."

Brazos Billy knew that resistance was useless. Still, he looked about desperately, as if meditating a reckless dash.

The cocking of other revolvers brought him to his senses.

"I'll surrender," he said, putting up his hands.

A man glided forward, wound a rope around his wrists, and Brazos Billy was again a prisoner.

The men were followers of Colino, and the pistol shot in the cavern, together with the "chr-r" of the prairie dog owl had drawn and directed them.

Billy's late prisoner had sent forth that "chr-r," thinking he heard the movements of his pard outside.

This prisoner, now that his peril was ended, and he was released, became rabidly venomous, and demanded the immediate death of Brazos Billy.

"Look at that, will ye?" he howled, holding up his bleeding wrist.

But his wishes were not gratified.

When the cavern had been looted of everything of value, Brazos Billy was conducted from it as a prisoner, the destination of the band being a secret rendezvous on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The hour was about midnight when the river was gained, at a point a hundred yards above the outlaws' hiding-place.

Here a boat was brought into use, for the place could only be reached by water, and in this boat Billy embarked, with three of his captors.

Billy knew that the men expected to meet Colino in a few minutes, and his fears grew. A meeting with Colino would probably result in Billy's death.

He felt that if he escaped at all he must escape before Colino's stronghold was reached.

His hands were bound, but his feet were not. He had writhed at the cords on his wrists until the skin had been torn, but the knots held. He could not get at the knife he always kept concealed in an inner pocket.

Fortunately his hands were not tied behind his back, as they had been when he

was held a prisoner by the pretended Indians.

A desperate plan entered his mind as the prow of the boat cut the water.

Two of the men were sitting in the stern of the boat, so that he was within the direct range of their vision. It was very dark, though, and they could only see his outline.

"The boat's tipping!" he suddenly cried, with a disconcerting yell.

Then he lurched into the stream, going down head first, and trying to overturn the boat with his feet.

The heavy kick he gave it spun it half round, and, though it did not overturn the boat, it served a good purpose in keeping the men from using their pistols. It was all they could do for a little while to retain their places.

One of the paddles was dropped and swept away, and the boat swung broadside down stream.

But the outlaws speedily regained their heads and control of the boat, and then watched, with eager eyes, for the reappearance of Brazos Billy. They expected his head to bob to the surface, and meant to fire at it as soon as it was in sight.

But the darkness favored the boy. He was a dozen yards down stream when he rose cautiously to the surface, and then he was not seen, though he could dimly make out the boat, and could plainly hear the exclamations and curses of the men.

The boat was floating toward him, so he sank noiselessly and swam toward the American side of the river.

The stream was not wide there, and his feet soon touched bottom.

When he cautiously poked up his head a black rock was beside it, which served further to make him invisible.

The outlaws on the shore had been alarmed, and also those farther down. Questions and calls rang across the water.

Two other boats soon appeared, and a search for Billy began.

The river was crossed and recrossed. Lanterns gleamed and torches flared.

But Brazos Billy, hiding beside the rock, was not seen.

In about a half hour the search was given over, and the boats disappeared around the bend.

"Colino's stronghold must be there!"

With this reflection, Brazos Billy floated quietly down in the wake of the boat.

At the turn of the angle he saw lights on the shore. There seemed to be a rocky walled space leading into a high cavern or rock house.

He crawled out of the water above this point, where he lay for a long time.

When the men had disappeared in the rock house he crept forward, boldly passed through the entrance, and lay just within by the side of the stone wall, his form indistinguishable from the boulders.

The interior of this rock house was well lighted, and a number of men were visible.

At one side was a table, on which was heaped a quantity of silver coin, together with dies and molds.

Farther back he fancied he beheld the glow of a furnace or crucible.

He knew he had discovered the rendezvous of the counterfeiters for which he was searching.

Much excitement seemed to exist. No doubt this excitement pertained to himself.

As he lay there a party passed him, going out in search of him.

Then a sentinel was stationed at the door beyond him.

His situation became critical. It seemed impossible for him to get away without attracting the attention of this sentinel.

The sentinel began to walk to and fro in the opening, the inner limit of his walk

bringing him almost within touch of Billy's hand. He probably saw Billy, but took the boy for a boulder.

Another man hurried by from the cave to join those who had just gone out.

"Colino's red hot. He thinks the boys let that fellow git away just through carelessness. He wouldn't have had it happen for a mint of money."

"Counterfeit money, eh?" the sentinel queried, with a laugh.

"Well, if the chap's caught it will go hard with him. I've about come to the notion that he's drowned. We'll know in the morning. He can hardly get away without making some kind of a trail!"

The man passed on, and the sentry resumed his walk.

Brazos Billy's anxiety deepened.

But affairs were destined to be brought to a speedy crisis.

The sentry, in his walk, came nearer and nearer to the hidden boy. Billy could not move away because of the wall, nor could he go toward the sentry without danger of detection.

Then the man, extending his walk farther than ever, stepped on one of Billy's outstretched hands.

The pain was unendurable.

Billy jerked the hand away, lifted himself with a yell, and leaped at the sentry's throat. He knew that he could only escape now by creating a surprise and a panic.

The sentry reeled backward, half lifting his rifle, which Billy dashed aside.

The movement opened a way of escape, and Brazos Billy, taking instant advantage of it, sprang by.

The sentry's rifle blazed, and an alarmed hubbub came from the rock house, followed by cries and calls from the men who had gone out.

Judging by the use of the boats that there was but one way in or out of the place, Billy boldly took a header into the river and swam downstream as fast as he could.

A pursuit by boats was begun, but it was fruitless, and, before day dawned, Brazos Billy had left the stronghold of Colino far behind.

CHAPTER X.

A BEWILDERING MEETING.

"I'm going down there!"

This was Brazos Billy's announcement to his friend, Bob Roundtree, as they looked from the summit of a hill into the valley which contained the encampment of soldiers.

Another day had gone by.

"A leetle bit risky, don't you think? It was a job to git you out of that camp, and now you want to git back."

"But, really, don't you think it's better to go there now, while Crosscut is away?"

Bob Roundtree shook his head. They had discussed the question before. From that same summit they had seen Lieutenant Crosscut and a small detachment ride and disappear in the adjacent hills.

"Captain Marchmont seemed an honest sort of a man, and I am willing to trust him. I can tell him the straight truth, you know, and show him my credentials, and I'll ask him to help us instead of hindering us, in our work."

The experiment was regarded as a dubious one by the over-cautious Rio Grande Rob.

"You're the navigator, though," he admitted. "If so be you say go ahead, why, we go ahead."

"Then, we'll go ahead."

"You don't think I'd better stay back, so's to git you out o' trouble—unkink the snarl that I feel it in my bones you're git-ting yourself into?"

"I don't think so. The straight way is usually the best way."

Brazos Billy was mounted and Rio Grande Rob afoot, and in this manner they set off for the camp in the valley, Roundtree leading the way.

Both were somewhat uneasy and uncertain as to the outcome of the venture.

They came within view of the soldiers, were directed by a sentry to the captain's quarters, and then moved on quietly until the nearest tent was gained, when Brazos Billy swung his feet out of the stirrups, intending to leap down.

As he did so he and his pard were treated to a bewildering surprise.

The flap of the tent was pushed aside, and Lizzie Benson, the niece of Brace Benson, stood revealed.

"By the great stone nose of my—" Billy began, then became speechless.

Lizzie Benson was the very last person they had expected to see in the soldier camp.

"I beg pardon," she stammered, and drew back.

"We're the ones to beg pardon," Brazos Billy declared. "We didn't expect to see you here, and that's a fact."

"No?" and she elevated her eyebrows. "We are here through the kindness of Lieutenant Crosscut."

"Then you know him?" Brazos Billy gasped, almost involuntarily.

Rio Grande Rob touched him on the shoulder.

"Better come on," he growled, in a half whisper. "We're bein' stared at a whole lot. Them soldiers recernize you, I reckon."

Brazos Billy hurried on with Bob Roundtree, leading his horse and in momentary expectation of arrest, and soon found himself before the tent that had been pointed out to them as the captain's.

Into this tent they were conducted, while Billy's horse was led away.

"So you thought you would come back before you were run down and captured," said Marchmont, looking Billy sharply in the face.

Billy was feeling in his pockets for some documents, which he produced, and then threw back a flap of his coat.

"I want you to look at that first, Captain Marchmont, and then at these papers," was his earnest request. "They will show you, I think, that I was held wrongly by you the other night."

Captain Marchmont stared and opened his eyes in wide surprise.

The flap of the coat turned back revealed a Secret Service badge; and the letters which Marchmont instantly examined, told him that Brazos Billy, or William York, was really a police officer, with credentials duly authenticated, who was commissioned to look up certain criminals known to be in that section of the Rio Grande region.

The captain could hardly repress a low whistle of astonishment.

"Why didn't you show these before? You'd have been treated differently."

Then he halted, while a look of uncertainty crept into his eyes and the old suspicion clouded his face.

"But," and he seemed to weigh his words, "you mustn't forget that it's quite possible you have no right to these papers. You may have taken them from William York, you see. How am I to—"

"I tell you, captain, he's as straight as a string," put in Rio Grande Rob, somewhat testily.

"And who's to vouch for you? You look like a cowboy rather than a detective!"

"Krect you air, captain," Roundtree cheerfully assented. "That's jist what I am. I'm a cowboy, late of the Double-V, and I've straddled a cow pony for more

years than I've got fingers and toes. All the same, I know that the story my young friend hyer has strung you is as straight as a wire fence."

The captain turned the papers over in his hands, and then carefully reread them, studying the face of the youth before him as he did so.

Finally, he handed them back.

"Probably I've no reason to doubt your word, Mr. York. I'm sure I beg your pardon, if I wrong you. For the present you have the freedom of the camp, you and your companion. You will not violate it, I'm sure."

"The matter of your escape before has not been explained."

Here Roundtree again put in an oar, insisting that he was the party to be blamed, if any one, and he made so brilliant and flourishing a defense of his young friend that a smile was won from the serious captain.

An officer came to the tent door, and was invited in and made acquainted with the statements made by the Brazos Boy and his pard.

"We were mistaken, sergeant, I don't doubt, when we held this young man. He and his partner are, at present, our friends and guests. Introduce them, and see that they are so treated."

Brazos Billy and Rio Grande Rob followed the sergeant out into the open air, feeling that they had gained a victory, though they had the uneasy sensation that the victory was a doubtful one, which might not serve them long.

CHAPTER XI.

AN AWKWARD SITUATION.

Several times that evening the Brazos Boy passed near the tent which held Lizzie Benson, yet he had not the courage to step up to its door and address her. He wondered if she were there, accompanied by her uncle, and almost decided that Brace Benson was not in the camp, inasmuch as he was not to be seen.

Night came, and, with it, the return of a body of men which Billy presumed to be the detachment that had gone out with Lieutenant Crosscut.

He did not see Crosscut with them, and marveled at it.

Finally he made up his mind to approach Lizzie Benson's tent, offer some excuse for his intrusion, and seek to start a conversation that should tell why she was there.

He was interrupted by voices as his feet were on the threshold—the voices of Lizzie Benson and Lieutenant Crosscut.

Brazos Billy stepped backward and away from the door of the tent.

Again Crosscut's voice sounded, and Brazos Billy, realizing that he was playing a sneaking part, turned to leave.

But he had lost his caution, and, as he turned about, he trod unwarily on a rotten mesquite branch, which broke under his foot with a sharp crackle.

Instantly, as it seemed, Crosscut was out of the tent.

"You scoundrel!" Crosscut roared, in hot anger. "What do you mean by eavesdropping here? Who are you, anyway?"

Then he saw, by the light of the camp fire, which burned but dimly, who the intruder was, and his venom increased.

"Ah! you are the scoundrel that cut his way out of the tent," Crosscut exclaimed. "One of Colino's men, who has the audacity to come back here and the effrontery to spy on my movements within my own camp! One of Colino's men!"

"That's a lie!" Brazos Billy hissed, in a tone that was low, but which contained the very essence of hate and wrath. "That's a lie, and you know it!"

Crosscut dropped back as if struck by a

blow in the face, and seemed about to draw his sword.

"You can't scare me with that thing! I'm not afraid of your sword, and if you want to fight me I'm not afraid to meet you!"

"No fighting here!" the girl cried, hurrying out of the tent, and placing herself between the belligerents.

The heart of the boy detective was hammering painfully, and his breath was coming in gasps. He knew that he was in an awkward situation. He felt that his explanations would be deemed by Crosscut, and probably by this girl also, a lie.

"I didn't know you were in the tent! I came to speak to this young woman, Miss Benson."

"That's all right. But that don't make it your business to come here eavesdropping!"

"I wasn't eavesdropping!" cried Billy.

"That's a—"

"No fighting now, Lieutenant Crosscut!" the girl interposed, sharply. "I don't doubt our young friend here will be able to make everything clear."

"And you must promise me that you will keep the peace, too," turning to Brazos Billy.

It was clear she feared trouble after they should depart from her presence.

"Promise me, both of you," she begged. "You must not let this go further. It is disgraceful!"

Brazos Billy was about to turn away, covered with confusion, when she detained him.

"Just a few words with you," she said, giving Lieutenant Crosscut a look which dismissed him from her presence.

"You don't wish to speak to this—this fellow," he protested, hesitating.

"Just a word or two."

Crosscut could do nothing but walk away.

Lizzie Benson came close to Brazos Billy, who was stupefied with amazement, and said, hurriedly:

"I'm sorry this happened. I do not blame you, understand. I know you didn't mean any harm. Better void Lieutenant Crosscut. Above all things, don't fight him. Promise me that you won't fight him."

"I said that I wouldn't, a while ago. Of course, I'll keep my promise."

"And remember, I don't think you meant any harm by what you did."

"Thank you!" said Billy, and then, observing that Crosscut was impatiently waiting for him to be gone, he hastened from the tent.

"She didn't say how long I was to keep away from him," he muttered, stumbling along. "The scoundrel, to call me one of Colino's men! If Colino has a spy in this camp it's Lieutenant Crosscut!"

"Eh, what's that?"

Billy had reached the tent occupied by himself in conjunction with Rio Grande Rob, and the question came from his pard.

"I'd like to shoot that Lieutenant Crosscut!" Billy declared. "He's the biggest villain alive."

"So much steam up you're about bu'stin' your b'iler, eh?" staring with lazy surprise into Billy's angry face. "Tell me about it."

This Billy did, and almost immediately Roundtree left the tent.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE GAME'S AFOOT."

No sooner was Bob Roundtree gone from the tent than Brazos Billy began to search in his pockets for writing material.

He found the stub of a pencil, and a notebook, from which he tore some pages, then scribbled the following note to Lizzie Benson:

Miss Benson—I write this to declare to you that I am not a member of Colino's band, as Lieutenant Crosscut charged. Whatever you may think of me, I hope you won't think that. Some day I may be able to give you the proof of what I say. Pardon me for thus writing to you.

Faithfully yours, WILLIAM YORK."

He read it over and over, hardly knowing whether to send it to her or not.

The flap of the tent shook and Rio Grande Bob entered.

"The game's afoot!" he whispered, in much excitement.

"What do you mean?" questioned Billy.

"Jist what I said. The game's afoot. I knowed a feller onct that went a fox chasin' ever' day, and when the fox started, he always blatted out that way, jist like a sheep, 'The game's afoot!' And o—"

"Which don't explain anything. Speak plainer!"

"I've been scoutin' 'round," said Roundtree. "Brace Benson's been in the camp. He's been in that tent, talkin' to his niece, and may have been there when you had your racket with the lieutenant."

"And, now, him and Crosscut have left the camp together, and have cut out over the perrairie. They're up to dirt. I think they're goin' to jine Colino, fer some reason. I heard 'em say Eagle Rock, and I know where that is."

"I watched 'em that fur, an' then I sneaked to the captain's tent, an' I said to the captain, says I, 'Will you be so good as to permit me an' my pardner to leave the camp fer a while to-night? We'll not take his hoss, and we'll try to be back before mornin'.'"

"And the captain, he up and tells me, jist like a gentleman, that we're not prisoners, an' kin go an' come jist when we please."

"An' so I thanked him, and he give me these passes, an' we're goin' to put out o' hyer jist as fast as our legs will let us."

Brazos Billy was naturally much astonished, and demanded further explanations.

"No, we can't trace 'em afoot," Roundtree admitted. "I calc'lated to git them two hosses that air in the valley near our headquarters, you know. We kin walk to that p'int in a half-hour. I kin make hackamores fer bridles, and we kin git along without saddles, as we've done many a time. What do you say?"

"Just a minute, and I'm with you."

Brazos Billy tore out another sheet from the notebook and scribbled a few lines of explanation to Captain Marchmont.

While he was doing it, Roundtree went in search of Marchmont's little son, in accordance with Billy's wishes, and when he came back with the boy, Brazos Billy put into the boy's hands the two notes, requesting him to deliver them without delay.

When they had worked their way out of the camp, they hastened to the valley, secured the horses mentioned by Roundtree, and started, at a swinging gallop, for Eagle Rock, on the Rio Grande River.

Roundtree's information led him to believe that Brace Benson and Lieutenant Crosscut contemplated a meeting at that point with the band of Colino the Firebrand.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DARING RESCUE.

The light of a camp fire shone through the darkness.

Brazos Billy and his pard had drawn near Eagle Rock and dismounted. They were now standing at their horses' heads, gazing at the camp fire, which rose and fell fitfully, under the influence of the breeze.

"Better hopple 'em and leave 'em here,"

suggested Brazos Billy, suiting the action to the word and producing a rope for the purpose of tying the legs of his horse so that it could not wander far.

When both horses had been fettered, Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree stole carefully on foot in the direction of the camp fire.

When they were within a hundred yards of it and could dimly discern the figures of the men gathered about it, Brazos Billy went on alone, creeping from bush to rock, with the greatest care.

He flattened himself out behind a big boulder twenty yards or more from the base of Eagle Rock, and stared at the men there grouped.

They were now to be seen distinctly. With them sat Lieutenant Crosscut and Brace Benson. All were talking eagerly. Their horses were picketed not far away.

Wildly anxious to hear what was being said and to establish in his own mind more firmly the guilt of Benson and the lieutenant, he left the shelter of the rock and again advanced, keeping his gaze fixed on the figures at the fire.

A sentry was crouching not far away, and Brazos Billy, walking in a semi-circle to gain a better point, fell fairly over this sentry.

He felt his feet and legs gripped, and this was followed by a jerking, downward pull.

However, he was not to be taken without an effort.

He was large and strong—a man in size, though only a boy in years; and, whirling on his back with the quickness of a cat, he reached up and drew the sentry down on top of him, squeezing him to his chest with a hug like that of a grizzly bear.

The sentry let out a yell, and then Brazos Billy found himself rolling over and over among the rocks in a desperate fight with the man.

"Take that, will you!" Billy exclaimed at last, freeing his fist and dashing it into the man's face.

The blow was a heavy one, so heavy that the man half released his hands, and in another minute Brazos Billy would probably have succeeded in freeing himself and making off.

But the sentry's cry had not gone unheeded. It had created a wild commotion at the camp fire, and Brazos Billy, now in the moment of his victory, was set on by half a dozen men, who pulled him rudely backward, with harsh cries and curses.

"Who is it?" Colino demanded, his question echoed by others.

Crosscut looked into the flushed face of the prisoner, who was dragged to the fire.

"It's that boy!" he cried, in utter amazement. "Colino, you've made a capture! Don't let him get away! Kill him, now that you've got him!"

"And I say! His pard must be near here. They always hunt together, like a pair of snakes."

Brazos Billy, even in that whirl of excitement, had thought of Bob Roundtree. He had more than half expected that Roundtree would dash to his assistance, in spite of the peril, for he knew how courageous Roundtree was when courage was demanded.

A quick order was given by Colino, and two or three men slipped out into the darkness away from the light of the fire.

The others, with Brace Benson and Crosscut, gathered about the prisoner, many of them with uplifted hands, as if they meant to strike him to the earth.

Brazos Billy dismayedly saw that there was not a gleam of hope for him in any of the faces around him. Only looks of hatred and anger greeted him. He felt if

Roundtree did not come to his aid his minutes were numbered. Not that he doubted Roundtree's desires, but Roundtree's ability.

"Look you here!" commanded Colino, with sudden fierceness. "You remember when you kicked me at Brace Benson's, after the fire?"

Brazos Billy stared into Colino's wrathful face, and for the first time recognized him as the man who had been hiding under the old clothes, and who had called himself a cowboy and given his name as Sam Adair.

The recognition did not tend to quiet his fears.

"You and your pard kicked and choked me then like I was a dog," Colino continued. "It's my turn now! What are you doing here?"

Billy looked about at the stern faces, hideous with hate and reddened by the light of the fire.

"Answer my question," commanded the leader of the Firebrands.

Brazos Billy drew himself up sturdily. He resolved not to show fear in the presence of these men.

"As for answering your questions, I'll see you hanged first!"

One of the men picked up a brand from the fire and thrust it near Brazos Billy's throat.

"Shall I scar him?" he asked. "I can make him talk!"

But another of the Firebrands plucked away the burning stick.

"Tell us what you're doing in this country? Oh, we know who you are!"

Brazos Billy firmly closed his lips.

"You won't answer, eh?" roared Juan Colino. "Are your rifles ready, boys? Tie his hands."

Billy was quickly seized and his hands and feet bound with some small rope. Then he was stood on a knoll at a little distance, and a firing party of three men lined up in front of him, with rifles held in readiness.

"Will you talk or not?" Colino questioned.

He took out a handsome gold watch and began to count off the seconds.

"I'll give you just a minute to speak—no more! If you don't open your mouth at the end of that time, I'll order my men to shoot you!"

There was no relenting in his tones. Brazos Billy could not doubt that he meant every word, and at the expiration of the minute those rifles would belch their contents and he would fall a corpse if he did not reply to Colino's questions.

Twenty seconds went by. Thirty seconds. The nerve strain was terrible, and Brazos Billy felt his courage failing. The silence was like that of a graveyard. Not a man spoke. Only Colino, standing there with the watch in his hand, slowly counting.

A revolver rang out, followed by wild cries and the tramping of hoofs, throwing all into confusion.

Colino turned, with the watch in his hand.

Then, out of the gloom of the night, there leaped a horse and rider.

The horseman was Rio Grande Rob.

Rio Grande Rob had not been idle all those minutes. He had seen and understood what had happened, knew well the peril of his pard, and had acted without delay.

When he saw Brazos Billy fall into the hands of their foes, and he was powerless to aid him; saw the searchers hurry out into the darkness under Colino's instruction, he got away from the vicinity with great stealth and celerity, and ran to the hopped horses.

One of these, the largest and strongest,

as well as the fleetest, he released and got ready for the desperate plan that was forming in his mind.

The firelight was to be seen from that point, with the excited figures grouped about it.

He saw Brazos Billy tied and stood out on the knoll to be shot. It did not need words to explain to him the meaning of what he beheld.

He tore his coat into pieces and muffled the feet of his horse.

Then he drew out his revolver, threw himself on the horse's bare back, and urged it toward the camp fire.

Not until he was within a comparatively few yards and realized more fully the great danger surrounding Brazos Billy, did he fire his revolver, utter those wild cries, and dash to the rescue.

He came like a whirlwind, too, utterly reckless of consequences, as it seemed.

At every leap of the big horse his revolver spoke, and one of those fierce and terrifying yells came from his lips.

The noise made by him and the horse, with the crack—crack! of the revolver, was demoralizing. It was hard to tell whether one or a dozen men were charging the camp, and Colino's followers, surprised and thrown into a half-panic, fell back before his onset.

It was all done in a minute—in less than a minute! Roundtree crashed through the crowd about the camp fire, and then, seizing Brazos Billy, who still stood helplessly bound on the knoll, he pulled him up in front of him on the back of the horse, Indian fashion.

"Hang on!" he whispered.

Then he half-turned and sent the last shot out of his revolver at Juan Colino, who was recovering his head and beginning to howl out orders.

The bullet cut through Colino's hat, but it did not sufficiently disconcert the chief of the Firebrands to cause him to cease his commands.

Colino had got out his own pistol, and now began to fire at the retreating forms, urging his men to do the same, and a rain of rifle and revolver bullets stormed around Bob Roundtree's head.

But they were ineffectual. The horse received a slight wound in the shoulder, but neither Brazos Billy nor Roundtree was hurt, and the horse was not sufficiently injured to sensibly lame it.

The crash of the revolvers and rifles had scarcely ceased when Colino's men ran wildly for their horses for the purpose of beginning a pursuit.

Colino saw, as did also Brace Benson and Lieutenant Crosscut, how needful it was to keep these men from getting away. Crosscut felt that he could hardly return to camp with them there to confront him and face him down in his villainy.

The Firebrands required no urging. In an inconceivably short time a number of them had their horses ready and were thundering along after the fugitives.

Bob Roundtree pulled Billy a little higher on the shoulders of the horse, then reached over and cut the bonds that held Billy's hands and feet. He had dropped his useless revolver back into its place.

"We'll try it double," he said, slowing the pace of the horse. "Climb up in front of me!"

Up to that moment Brazos Billy had hardly said a word. Events had crowded too tumultuously.

"That was a fine trick," he declared, with fervid gratitude. "I hope I can do as much for you some day, Bob!"

"Stow that and climb up hyer!" Roundtree urged.

Brazos Billy lost no time in obeying. He threw himself across the shoulders of the horse, then astride, and they hurried on

again, changing their course to baffle the pursuers.

The cloth on the horse's feet seemed to clog its movements, and Roundtree slipped down and slashed it away.

Then he remounted, and again the horse was set going.

The double load told painfully on the horse, and if it had been daylight instead of night, Brazos Billy and his pard would have been overtaken, for Colino's men rode some fast animals.

But, by doubling and twisting, their Firebrand pursuers were given the slip.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SHOT FROM THE DARK.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The challenge came from the sentry at the soldier camp, and was directed to Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree.

They made the declaration that they were friends, showed the passes furnished by Captain Marchmont and gave the countersign, and were permitted to pass.

When past the sentry, they dismounted, and, leading the tired horse, went on to Marchmont's tent, where they made their presence known and asked for an interview, in spite of the unseemly hour.

Scarcely had they done so when they again heard the sentry's "Who goes there?"

Brazos Billy had come to a stern resolve. He knew, now, that Crosscut was a villain of the deepest dye, a member of Colino's band, and a double-faced traitor, and, knowing all this, he intended to denounce him to Captain Marchmont without further delay.

Not only that, he intended to demand Crosscut's arrest and surrender to the civil authorities for trial.

Marchmont came to the door of the tent, somewhat bewildered by the request for an interview at that time.

He had been roused from sleep. Back within the tent a lamp had been lighted, and, as Captain Marchmont appeared, his form dimly revealed by its light, Brazos Billy stepped forward, hat in hand.

Captain Marchmont could not see him plainly, and called out, suspiciously:

"Who's that out there? Is that you, William York?"

The tone seemed to indicate that the captain's mind had been poisoned against Brazos Billy, probably by the allegations of Lieutenant Crosscut.

Brazos Billy promptly informed the captain who he was, and what he wanted, at the same time stepping nearer, and, then, out of the darkness behind him, a revolver flamed, and Captain Marchmont dropped to the ground without a cry.

The wildest commotion followed. A dozen voices shouted at once:

Though Bob Roundtree almost felt the powder burn his shoulder, he did not see who it was that fired the shot.

The murderously minded wretch leaped backward before Roundtree could turn.

Brazos Billy sprang forward and tried to lift the fallen form of the captain. He could not see where the captain was hurt, but as he placed a hand to the captain's head he felt warm blood trickle over his fingers.

A sense of horror thrilled him. He did not doubt that murder had been deliberately committed.

He could not think by whom, and he did not stop to think that he himself might be charged with having fired the dastardly shot.

Bob Roundtree, almost as much excited as his pard, pushed by Brazos Billy into the tent, and, snatching up the lamp, ran out with it, that he might ascertain the character of the captain's injury and know what to do.

The soldiers were collecting by this time, and the sergeant pushed forward, with loud inquiries.

Behind the sergeant came Lieutenant Crosscut, also voluble with questions and in apparent great mental distress.

"Seize those men!" he commanded, when his eyes fell on Billy and Roundtree. "They are the very men who have done this!"

A dozen hands were reached forward to execute the order.

Both Bob Roundtree and Brazos Billy drew indignantly back.

"Ah, what is this?" Crosscut questioned, stooping to pick up something against which his foot had stumbled, and holding it aloft.

It was Brazos Billy's revolver, which had been taken from him by Colino's men at the time of his capture, that very night.

Several of the soldiers instantly recognized it, having seen it on Billy's person, and an angry outburst was the result.

Crosscut turned it over and examined it; then slipped out the cylinder. One of its chambers was empty.

He held it up, exhibiting the empty chamber.

"It's clear who shot the captain," he declared, with fierce vehemence. "Take charge of this revolver, sergeant. We'll need it as evidence."

"Not so fast!" Roundtree protested. "That there captain of yours mayn't be dead, though there's some that hopes he is, I don't doubt."

He shot a meaning glance at Crosscut, who was bending over the captain.

It was clear to Brazos Billy and his pard that Lieutenant Crosscut had shot his superior officer, and that he had used that revolver to cause it to seem that Brazos Billy was the murderer.

They believed, also, that Crosscut had gone about the thing with some deliberation, knowing that he would be the one in command after Marchmont's death, and anxious to have supreme control, for a while, that he might dispose of these dangerous enemies.

It became clear, though, as water was applied and the wound examined, that the shot was not a fatal one—not even seriously dangerous in its character.

Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree were not permitted to linger longer, but were led away and thrust into a tent, where a double guard was set over them.

They knew that the situation was serious, their peril very real.

Captain Marchmont was loved by his men. The soldiers had seen the accusing revolver held up by Lieutenant Crosscut, and had no reason to doubt the truthfulness of the charges or Crosscut's motives in making them. That Crosscut was not personally popular did not matter in a case like this.

The story that Brazos Billy had shot the captain went around the camp like wildfire, and a settled rage resulted.

Crosscut talked to the sergeant, as the wound was examined and the captain made comfortable, speaking all the time in a way to be heard by the assistants and soldiers grouped about, asserting that Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree were members of Colino's band of Rough Riders, and speculating as to why they had so boldly attempted murder.

The credulous soldiers listened, believing, as Crosscut stated his notion that Brazos Billy and Roundtree, knowing Colino was in peril from the presence of the soldiers under the leadership of Captain Marchmont, had hoped to turn the soldiers back by murdering their commander, and had thought, by the very daring with which the deed was committed, to escape suspicion.

He added that it was even possible they would have been willing to die to help the Rough Riders if it had been necessary.

Captain Marchmont was placed on the cot in his tent, and the surgeon, who had come forward dilatorily, but now had charge of the case, ordered the application of stimulants.

"Will he die, surgeon?" Crosscut questioned, hardly able to conceal his real feelings on the subject.

The surgeon looked into the captain's face and felt his pulse.

"Not a bit of it! He's worth a dozen dead men! I'll have him sitting up and giving his orders before morning."

Lieutenant Crosscut turned away with great bitterness of heart.

He could not consider that his plans had been a success so long as Marchmont lived.

CHAPTER XV.

LIZZIE BENSON'S HEROISM.

Lizzie Benson sat, almost crouched, in the tent that had been assigned to her and her father while that wild tumult raged.

In her inmost heart she knew that Brazos Billy was not guilty of the thing Lieutenant Crosscut had so fiercely charged.

She did not know that Crosscut, as well as her uncle, belonged to Colino's band of Rough Riders. How could she know it when the fact had been jealously kept from her?

She had carefully read the note Brazos Billy had sent her by the hand of the captain's son, and now, when she felt that he was in such great peril, and she hesitated, not knowing what to do, she got out the note and reread it.

If anything was needed to further convince her of the innocence of Brazos Billy, she found it in that note, and her resolve was taken.

Impelled by an over-mastering curiosity, she left the tent and walked toward that of the captain, where she saw the soldiers gathered.

A good deal of time had elapsed since the firing of the shot. Brazos Billy and Roundtree were under guard, and she quickly became aware of the fact that Lieutenant Crosscut and her uncle, Brace Benson, were not at the captain's tent.

They were in the lee of a rock, near Benson's tent, a discovery she made by hearing a single word incautiously uttered by her uncle.

The word held a great deal of meaning. She had meant to approach and speak to them; now she decided to approach without making her presence known, and thus hear what they were talking about.

"Let's see!" Crosscut was saying. "It's only a little over three hours till daylight. Can you get Colino and the boys here in that time?"

The reply came in the voice of her uncle:

"They were to collect at the dove-cote, you know. Yes, I reckon I can make it."

The "dove-cote" was a rocky bluff, filled with holes, which gave it a fancied resemblance to a big pigeon-house.

"We can't fail in this thing," Crosscut half whispered. "The captain will be all right in a little while, curse him! I thought he was done for. We've got to move quick, before he recovers."

"You must get the boys here and have them make an assault on the camp, pretending that they are trying to rescue the prisoners. Every one thinks the chaps belong to Colino's band, and that will make it seem certain."

"Of course they'll be shot in the melee that follows, and we'll be rid of them for good."

The listening girl was filled with horror. Such villainy she had never dreamed possible. She could hardly believe the evidence of her ears.

She fairly gasped for breath, so tumultuous were her feelings. She could not doubt that her uncle and Crosscut were members of that terrible band of Rough Riders of the Rio Grande, of whom she had heard so much under the name of Colino's Firebrands.

Nor could she doubt that one of the speakers had shot the captain.

"We've got to carry the thing through," she heard Crosscut continue. "If we don't, it's all up with both of us. Unless"—and here he hesitated—"I can make it seem that their evidence is not worth listening to."

"I thought, with the captain out of the way we'd have things just as we wanted them. I took away that young scoundrel's badge and documents, so that, no matter what happened, he couldn't again show his authority for playing detective. But all that won't matter if the captain is all right and in command, for the captain has seen those things."

"No, there's only one sure way. Have Colino make a dash, as if to rescue them, and, in the defense, we'll see that the detectives get bullets through them."

"And I reckon I'd better be movin' my legs to do that!" declared Brace Benson, rising softly. "I'll take that big black horse and I'll make him fly."

"Yes, there's no time to lose," Crosscut advised. "Move as if the devil was after you. I'll have everything here ready for you. We're bound to win."

When they were gone Lizzie Benson crept breathlessly back to her tent, her mind in a whirl of uncertainty and confusion.

She did not know what to do. But there was one thing that rose above every other thought; she must do something to save the prisoners from death.

It was terrible to know that her uncle was one of the men against whom she must turn—was one of the men contemplating this cowardly deed of murder.

She waited in the tent until a half hour or more had passed, filled with a fierce impatience, yet fearing to emerge. And all that while she was striving to decide on the best manner of aiding the prisoners.

By the talk of the soldiers, who now and then passed, she learned that the captain was still in an unconscious condition.

She had been to the captain's tent and offered her services; now she resolved to go again. He might regain his senses, even while she was there, and furnish the opportunity she sought of warning him of the dreadful thing contemplated.

She went to the tent and was admitted.

But she was not favored. The captain lay as if breathing his last, though the surgeon, who was present, assured her that the captain's condition was very favorable.

There was no one in the camp to whom she now dared to go with her story.

She went back to her tent, and was again considering the situation.

She knew that her uncle had ridden away to bring Colino's men, and that Lieutenant Crosscut was waiting the coveted opportunity to shoot the prisoners.

Lieutenant Crosscut was in command, while the captain lay unconscious, and this fact decided her on a step she would otherwise have drawn back from with terror and trembling. What she did must be done stealthfully.

All interest was centered in the captain's tent, and Lizzie Benson was not seen when she slipped, shadow-like,

through the darkness, and crept surreptitiously to the rear of the guard tent occupied by Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree.

Although the tent was doubly guarded, she managed to writhe up to it from the rear and to thrust her head under the canvas.

She drew back with a start. The tent was dimly lighted, a low-burning lamp having been set on a box near the center to illuminate it and render its occupants visible to the guards.

A blanket was lying near which she cautiously drew about her head.

Then she looked again and discovered that the prisoners were tightly bound. She had feared they might be in chains.

With the blanket drawn about her, she crawled forward, dropping down whenever she heard the guards.

The blanket was so excellent a concealment that the guards would probably not have observed her had they looked in.

But Brazos Billy, who was wide awake, saw her.

He was discreet enough, however, to keep silent.

Then he beheld her draw the blanket from about her face, and, recognizing her, was too bewildered to speak had it been the time and place.

She pushed a small pocket-knife toward him, then crawled still nearer, and whispered:

"Don't move! Don't say a word! I've come to help you! You'll be killed if you stay here."

Bob Roundtree rolled over, rubbed his eyes, and looked her full in the face. Her words had awakened him.

He understood the situation and made no further movement.

"The captain will get well," she continued. "You must leave here. Crosscut is to have you killed. I haven't time to explain more. But you must go. You must trust me."

The words were whispered so lowly that the closest attention was needed to render them intelligible.

However, they came to Brazos Billy quite clearly, and this reiteration of her commands, and the entreaty in her voice, decided him.

He hesitated no longer, but cut the bonds that held his feet, and then those that bound Bob Roundtree.

She was already turning to crawl away, but he thrust the knife back into her hands, and then followed her, he and Roundtree moving across the floor of the tent with the stillness and almost the slowness of a shadow crawling across the face of a dial.

Almost five minutes elapsed before they found themselves outside of the tent and crawling away from it into the darkness.

When they had accomplished a considerable distance and began to feel more secure, they halted, and Brazos Billy turned inquiringly to the girl:

"I must go back to our tent," she whispered. "You must not stay here. Get out of the camp as quick as you can."

And she told what she had heard passing between Crosscut and her uncle, speaking hurriedly.

"Then we'll go on," said Brazos Billy. "I'm almost sorry you put yourself in such danger for us. But we will go. And may God bless you. The time will come, I am sure, when we can show we are not guilty and face down these scamps."

Lizzie Benson turned back to her tent, and the fugitives slipped away in the direction of the horses, which were corralled further down the valley.

By careful maneuvering they passed the sentries, and were approaching the horses, when an outcry and commotion an-

nounced that their escape from the guard tent had been discovered.

Brazos Billy rose to his feet and glanced back.

"No use delaying now. We must have a pair of horses, whether they are ours or not."

The horses were not a dozen yards away, and, fortunately, the attention of the sentries in charge of them was drawn at that instant toward the camp, where the sounds of alarm were rising.

Brazos Billy leaped to one horse and Bob Roundtree to another.

The hobbles were cast off the animals, and each horse, though without saddle or bridle, but with a man on his back, raced out of the valley toward the plain below.

The sentries' rifles cracked and the alarm resolved itself into a general tumult.

But Brazos Billy and his pard were already beyond the reach of successful pursuit.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TELL-TALE LETTER.

Captain Marchmont had been unconscious from the moment the shot was fired that brought him down in the door of his tent.

When the alarm sounded every one hurried out of the tent, even to the surgeon.

The last to go was Lieutenant Crosscut, who had been sitting at the head of the cot, studying the captain's face.

The captain, aroused to full consciousness by the outcry, lifted himself on his elbow.

As he did so, he beheld a folded sheet of paper that had dropped from Crosscut's pocket.

The light from the lamp that shone at the head of the cot clearly revealed the writing.

Seeing its value, and feeling justified in the act, because of its importance and the singular address it bore, Captain Marchmont leaned over, picked it from the ground, and ran over it with staring eyes.

It was a letter which Lieutenant Crosscut had written to Captain Colino, the chief of the Rough Riders.

The letter was of the most startling character.

It contained an account of how Crosscut had shot the captain, and his reasons for doing it, which showed that his intention had been to kill the captain.

Not only that. It contained an outline of the plot to bring about the death of the prisoners, Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree.

The captain stared as if stupefied. His whole frame shook, and his face, which had been white and bloodless before, grew absolutely ashy.

But the information held in that letter had really strengthened the captain instead of weakening him. It was like a strong stimulant.

He folded it and placed it in the bosom of his shirt, where he felt it would be safe.

Then he lay back on the cot, and closed his eyes in a vain endeavor to think clearly and connectedly.

A maze of doubt had suddenly encompassed him. He had never dreamed that Crosscut was one of the Firebrands.

Many things that had seemed enigmatical became clear as he reclined there, forgetful of the tumult, thinking, thinking! Many acts of Lieutenant Crosscut took on a new meaning.

"The traitor!" he at length hissed. "The traitor! And to think that I have been so blind!"

He lifted himself again and looked down at the spot where he had seen the letter

lying, and became aware that another paper lay there.

He half rose and picked it up, and, as he read it, an exclamation broke from his pallid lips.

It had also been written by Crosscut, and it made the astonishing declaration that the girl known as Lizzie Benson was not the niece of Brace Benson, but the daughter of Captain Marchmont, and that her name was Bessie Marchmont.

"My God! can this be true?" he wildly questioned, pressing a hand to his wounded and aching head.

He felt his brain spinning round like a top.

"Can this be true?" he repeated; then reread the letter, with staring eyes:

"I found this out by a sort of half-accident. Benson spoke of it, in his sleep, one night when I was camping with him, and used the name of Lee Dayton. I went to Dayton the next day, pretended to know all about it, and got the truth out of him, so far as he could give it to me.

"Captain Marchmont had a daughter, who was two or three years old when the campaign against Kizell and his Apaches was going on in Arizona. He took the little girl and her mother, his wife, to some fort down there, where he could be near them.

"One day, while his wife and daughter were strolling with some friends, in a canyon within sight of the fort, a lot of Apaches crept on them, killed every one in the crowd except the little girl, whom they carried away.

"Dayton and another chap, both mining at the time, had the good luck to rescue the girl two years afterward. They found her with an old Apache, and bought her for a rifle and a flask of whisky, and, not knowing who she was, carried her with them into the mines.

"They found a locket tied to her neck, with a picture and a piece of paper in it, the paper saying her name was Bessie Marchmont. They didn't know of any Marchmonts, and they began to like the little girl, and, after a while, they began not to want to find any of the Marchmonts.

"Dayton's partner died, and he got, as a new pard, Brace Benson, whom he ran across in Silver City, it seems. Benson got it into his head that maybe it would be money in their pockets if he could find her folks, and he made some inquiries, but it didn't amount to anything.

"Then Dayton got sick of mountain fever, and, before he was well, Benson had to leave that part, having got mixed up in a shooting scrape. He took the girl with him.

"Dayton didn't see him again until last year, here in Texas. Then Benson was calling the girl Lizzie Benson, and was saying she was his niece. As it had been a long time, and Dayton had got so he'd most forgot her, he didn't care for her, he let it pass at that, especially as Benson seemed to think a great deal of her, and didn't want her to know she wasn't any kin to him.

"Then we came into the neighborhood, and Benson, still smelling gold, went to work to find out if he was any kin to the girl, and, by doing some writing, he found out, without any doubt, that the girl was Marchmont's own daughter.

"He's been figuring on that fact to get him out of any scrape he may fall into, for he thinks the captain, when he knows how well he's treated the girl, wouldn't push any case against him, and, besides, he's calculating to get a pile of money out of Marchmont by and by for restoring to him his daughter.

"But I'm aiming to get ahead of him,

and he, like a fool, is helping me. thinks it a good idea to have my friendship, and I don't know but he's right.

"I intend to marry the girl, and marry her before she finds out that she's related to Marchmont. If she waited till she knew that I reckon my cake would be dough. Benson is urging her to marry me, or, at any rate, he don't seem to be putting anything in my path.

"Captain Marchmont is a very rich man, if he is an army officer. As his son-in-law I'll come in for a good sum of money. It's as good a way to get money as I know. I've got other ways, but they're riskier by a good deal."

The captain's hands shook as he read this.

The letter was not written, like the first, to Colino, but to a man in Ohio, who had been aiding Lieutenant Crosscut in some way.

Captain Marchmont heard not a word of all that was occurring outside the tent. He was deaf and blind to everything but the revelations of that night.

Lizzie Benson, his daughter Bessie, whom he believed to have been killed so many years ago by Apaches in Arizona!

He pictured his little girl as he had seen her the last time, when he had departed from her and her mother, and then he recalled, with the old pang, how the news had come to him of her mother's death and of the little girl's capture.

He remembered how he had tried to recover her; how he had followed clew after clew, and how his heart broke, when he became convinced that she, as well as her mother, was dead.

Then he thought of Lizzie Benson, as he knew her, and his cold heart warmed as his fancy showed many marks of family resemblance, which, before that moment, he had entirely overlooked.

He was in this mood, with the letter held in his shaking hands, when a step sounded beside him, and he glanced up to see Lieutenant Crosscut.

Crosscut had entered softly, thinking the captain still unconscious, and had been bewildered beyond measure to behold Marchmont sitting erect in that manner.

Marchmont looked like a man who had risen from the grave, with his white face and the bandage around his head. His eyes were burning like coals.

"Do you see this?" he said, and his words were almost a gurgle, so intense were his emotions. "You wrote this. Tell me, is it true?"

Lieutenant Crosscut, in that instant, seemed to become transformed into a demon. No doubt fear was largely instrumental in the change.

With one swoop of his hand he tore the letter from the captain's fingers, and then, with a mighty blow, he struck the captain senseless.

He looked at the letter, to see that it was all there, then felt wildly in the pocket from which it had dropped.

He discovered that the other letter was also gone.

Then he observed the disarranged shirt-front, where the letter had been concealed, and, quickly thrusting in his hand, he drew the letter out.

He tucked them back into the pocket, then glared upon Captain Marchmont.

"I could kill you!" he hissed. "God! If I only dared to do it!"

His fingers sought the pistol at his hips, but he thrust it back.

"No! no!" nervously. "I should be discovered."

He looked again at the captain.

"I've got to cut out of this," reaching out a hand as if to turn down the lamp.

But a thought stayed the hand, and he walked toward the door.

The surgeon was returning, and met him there.

"Captain Marchmont has fallen in a faint," said Crosscut, with an excitement that seemed very natural. "He heard the racket and tried to sit up, I think, and tumbled off the cot. I tried to lift him back, but he's pretty heavy, and so I was going after you. I'm glad you're here."

The surgeon looked quickly toward the fallen captain.

"I'll send some one to help you!" suggested Crosscut, who was wild to get away from there. "How's the chase getting on?"

He did not delay to hear the surgeon's reply, but ran on out of the tent, calling to some of the soldiers to go to the surgeon's aid.

To others he repeated the question as to how the pursuit was progressing, and learned that the fugitives had not been overhauled.

"I'll have to take charge of that, I guess," he declared, and gave orders for his horse and for a detachment of four men.

And when they came he put himself at their head and rode out of the camp.

CHAPTER XVII.

BLUECOATS AGAINST FIREBRANDS.

They had hardly gone a mile when they encountered some troopers returning, of whom they made inquiries.

Nothing had been seen of the fugitives. The night was too dark for trailing.

This meeting with the troopers suited Crosscut's plans well.

There were other troopers still out, and he instructed those who had ridden with him from the camp to return to it, saying he would go on alone.

Then, as soon as they had departed, and he felt free to follow his own devices, he changed his course and rode in the direction of what he knew to be the encampment, for that night, of the Rough Riders.

He did not doubt that Brace Benson was hastening forward with the Rough Riders at that moment.

And, as he rode along, a plan that had dimly come to him took definite shape in his mind.

A trampling of hoofs of ponies and horses caused him to draw rein and listen.

"Ah, here they are!"

With this exclamation he reined in his horse beside a rock, and waited until Colino's Firebrands were close enough to be identified, when, sure he was not mistaken, he made his presence known, and rode out to intercept them.

"I came out to hurry you up," he explained, glibly. "The night isn't going to hold much longer, you know. You've got to get a move on you."

"We come as fast as we could," Benson growled. "Seems to me you're a little reckless, ridin' out to meet us, this way, and running such a big chance of missing us."

He was displeased and somewhat suspicious. He knew Crosscut well enough to cause him to fear a double deal.

Crosscut's plan was fully formed.

He meant to keep quiet about the escape of the prisoners, and have the Rough Riders make a dash on the camp, just as if Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree were still there.

And, under cover of this charge of Colino's band, he meant to push his way into the camp and kill the captain.

He reasoned that, if he found the captain still unconscious and by a pistol shot kept his lips still sealed, the secret which the captain had become so unfortunately possessed of would still be safe.

"An hour and a half till daylight," he said, looking at his watch by the light of

a match. "Take the straightest course, Benson, and ride hard."

Benson was guiding the party, and Lieutenant Crosscut dropped into the ranks by the side of Colino, who rode near the head.

"Everything is all right, is it?" Colino questioned. "I reckon you know just where that tent is?"

"You bet!" Crosscut asserted, his mind on the captain's tent. "I'll look after that, Benson and I. You fellows do the yelling and the shooting, and I'll see that each of the prisoners gets a bullet through his head before the thing is over!"

Juan Colino, who was in many respects a typical Mexican, drew out some tobacco and a slip of paper and coolly rolled a cigarette, which he lighted as they rode on.

"Little bit risky, that, ain't it?" Crosscut suggested.

"It would be if we were goin' against Indians," answered Colino. "But these troopers—bah! How much nose has a trooper got? They couldn't smell carrion if they walked over it."

Hardly a mile had been passed over, when, in galloping through a rocky draw, intent only on hurrying forward, and never dreaming of danger, a heavy rifle fire broke forth.

It was well aimed, and centered on the Rough Riders.

Colino's Firebrands had ridden into an ambush, and, before they knew what had happened, half of their saddles were emptied, and still the troopers worked their rifles.

The troopers were those who had set out to search for Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree. They had become aware of the approach of Colino's men and of their character, and had used the rocky draw as a death trap for the outlaws.

Juan Colino sought to rally his men to a successful resistance.

He drew his pistol and yelled:

"Charge them! At 'em!"

Lieutenant Crosscut imitated Colino's example, and strove to inspire the Rough Riders with courage.

"At them!" cried Colino, again and again, firing his revolver as fast as he could work it. "Give it to the dogs!"

But, even as he thus cried, a rifle ball passed through his body, and he fell from his horse, which galloped wildly away.

The Firebrands were worsted and panic-stricken. Brace Benson was killed.

Those not killed or wounded thought only of escape.

Crosscut wheeled his horse and rode toward the other entrance of the draw, and, uninjured, galloped out on the plain.

A half dozen of the Firebrands rode at his heels, as willing to follow him in flight as in victory.

Once beyond reach of the deadly, belching rifles, Crosscut drew rein and tried to imbue his men with some courage. They were too much scared for immediate service, though he was still filling his busy brain with schemes.

"We're alive, men, and still have our liberty! Let us be thankful for that! But we'll not be alive or have liberty long unless we carry out to some extent, the thing we set out to do."

"And be killed, the rest of us!" was growled into his ears.

"Hear me first, before condemning what I've got to say. We must kill those detectives, or we'll be driven out of the country! Now is our time. They're held in that tent. We'll never have such an opportunity!"

"And," he bent forward as if he feared the very winds might take cognizance of what he said, "let us put Captain Marchmont out of the way! If he is dead, I'm first in command of the troopers. And

you bet if I have charge of the troopers there's never any danger of any of you boys being taken."

He was feverishly in earnest, and his whispered words trembled on his lips.

"Will you follow me?" he questioned, eagerly. "We've got to go somewhere! Let's make a bold stroke!"

"I s'pose Colino's dead?" was questioned.

"No doubt! But I'll be your leader! I'll take the place of Juan Colino! And you know, boys, that you can trust me!"

His words had the effect intended. They knew not which way to turn, now, since that disaster resulting in the death of Colino and so many of their comrades.

They needed a leader, and, when a leader rose in the person of Lieutenant Crosscut, they gave him their allegiance and obedience.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CROSSCUT'S BOLD COURSE.

There was probably a feeling of revenge as much as anything else in Crosscut's heart when he placed himself at the head of the decimated band of Firebrands and swooped toward the camp of the troopers.

He knew that his case was desperate; that, do what he would, he could hardly, at this stage of the game, escape detection; but he felt that life might still hold some satisfaction for him if he could take the life of the captain he had learned to hate and scatter the troopers.

Daylight was almost at hand. It had been a night filled with events.

In a little hollow not far from the camp, which he and his men regained without creating any alarm, he placed his men in order and gave them their final instructions.

They were to make a desperate charge, screaming and howling like wild Indians, in the midst of which he was to ride to the captain's tent and finish the work before attempted.

The charge of the Rough Riders was as startling and as sudden as the descent of a thunderbolt.

The soldiers, however unprepared for it, met it gallantly.

The troopers who had encountered the Firebrands and had killed Colino and Benson, had not yet returned, so that the force pitted against the small band of Rough Riders was not great.

However, it was able to stem the charge.

Three more of the Firebrands fell, their horses darting away, and Lieutenant Crosscut, who had not found it possible to reach the captain's tent, sheered his horse sidewise and sought to make his escape.

The cries that arose told him he had been seen and recognized, and his infamy made apparent to every one.

As he rode like mad toward the entrance of the valley, he swept by the tent occupied by Lizzie Benson, and, seeing her dart out of it in much excitement, he guided his horse close to her.

Then he reached over, lifted her against the horse's side, and held her thus as he galloped out of the camp.

He heard the thunder of hoofs behind him and glanced frightenedly back.

Instead of a pursuing trooper, he saw a riderless horse—one of the horses which had been ridden by a Firebrand, who was now dead.

He drew the girl still higher on the saddle, and held her thus, letting his own horse free, and then stretched out his hand and caught the bridle of the other horse.

He was three or four hundred yards from the camp at this time.

The troopers had not yet rallied for pursuit, and, knowing he could not go on in that way, he stopped the horses and

let the girl drop to the ground, where she fell in a dead faint.

He stood for a moment looking down at her—having leaped out of the saddle, and a shade of perplexity and annoyance passed over his face.

The girl suddenly recovered consciousness and leaped to her feet, where she stood, reeling and staring at him.

"I had to bring you to save your life!" he declared, quickly stepping toward her.

"There's been an awful fight at the camp. The soldiers are nearly all killed, I believe. And we must be going or we'll be in the same fix."

She looked at him doubtfully, then glanced toward the camp.

"I'd rather go back there. Is the captain dead?"

"The captain's dead. You can't go back there. I shan't let you, for I know it would be your death. You'll have to ride that horse!"

"I can't! Oh, I don't want to go!"

Sounds of commotion, which she interpreted as an indication of pursuit came now distinctly.

"I can't let you have your own choice in the matter!" he declared, with a growing decision.

Then, without more ado, he lifted her to the back of the extra horse, and, mounting his own, he held her in position and rode slowly along at her side.

She was a dead weight for a few moments, and he was beginning to think it would be the part of wisdom to abandon her, when she recovered sufficiently to cling to the saddle and relieve him somewhat.

"That's right!" he said. "Hold fast and I'll get you away from those people."

She clutched at the saddle as if she hardly knew what she was doing, and the horses sprang down the valley.

There was no organized pursuit, seemingly, and in a little while Lieutenant Crosscut had no more fears on that score, and began to consider what he should do.

Up to this moment he had acted almost wholly on impulse, and he now began to feel that he must reason out a course and be guided by it.

It required very little reflection to show him that his standing with the troopers was gone. They knew him now for what he was.

He could gain only punishment by seeking to return to the camp and re-establish himself.

All the bridges were removed behind him. He could only look to the future. What should he do? The Firebrands were killed or dispersed. He was a leader without a follower. Literally a fugitive.

And this girl?

He knew that Captain Marchmont was now acquainted with the facts concerning her. Marchmont had learned that this girl was his daughter, had learned Crosscut's schemes concerning her.

From these reflections he was recalled by Lizzie Benson, who pulled heavily on the bridle rein and announced, with fierce and unexpected vehemence, that she would go no further.

"You must take me back to the camp!" she panted. "If you don't, I shall go myself. It will be broad daylight now in a few minutes and I can make my way then easy enough."

"I can't let you do so foolish a thing," he protested.

She looked him full in the face and read the duplicity there written.

Her fears grew, likewise her desperation; and, with a cry of terror, she threw herself recklessly from the saddle.

It seemed a miracle that she was not killed. She rolled over and over on the ground, but when Lieutenant Crosscut

rode back and leaped down by her she staggered to her feet.

He saw she was not even seriously injured.

"You must go on with me!" he commanded, with savage persistence.

"I won't!" she asserted.

He deliberately took out his revolver and held it up before her, turning the muzzle into her face.

"Get up in that saddle, I say!" with forbidding harshness. "You are going with me. You might as well understand that, first as last!"

"You would not shoot me?" she gasped.

"Don't try me too far. I'm not in a pretty mood this morning, Miss Benson, as you've discovered."

He pushed her against the horse and again commanded her to get into the saddle, and assisted her, when, through fear, she began to obey.

He jerked the bridle-rein, and, spurring his own horse, they again moved on, Miss Benson almost helpless and strengthless.

As by an instinct, which had been aroused by the events of the night, she perceived that he was one of the very men whom the soldiers had sought.

And, thus recognizing his character, and forced to associate her uncle with him, she recalled the large amount of coin that had been secreted by them in the house that had been burned.

It had been brought there as the alleged money of a wealthy ranchman, who, departing from that locality, wanted Benson to hide and hold it for him.

She had been executing that trust, as she fancied, when she dragged the coin box out of the hot embers—the box which her uncle and Crosscut afterward took away, she knew not where.

And thus thinking, with her fears increasing, she began to scan the country through which they were passing, hoping against hope that some means of escape from her present dreadful position might be presented.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON A HOT TRAIL.

Shortly after sunrise, Brazos Billy, who had become temporarily separated from Bob Roundtree, saw, from an eminence, Lieutenant Crosscut hurrying across the plain, accompanied by Lizzie Benson.

He saw from her manner that she was accompanying Crosscut unwillingly.

Unfortunately, Brazos Billy was afoot, and so far from Crosscut and the girl that he was powerless to aid her.

He had a small pistol in an inner pocket that was wholly useless in the present emergency. A repeating rifle would hardly have served him.

With an expression of rage he saw Crosscut and Lizzie disappear from his view in a bend of the hills, and then he ran with all speed toward a distant point, where he had left the horse that had carried him out of the camp.

The point was a rendezvous where he had arranged to meet Bob Roundtree an hour later, so that, though Roundtree's horse was there, Roundtree was himself away.

Brazos Billy hastily wrote a note of explanation, which he placed in a cleft stick that he thrust upright in the ground where Roundtree could not fail to see it.

Brazos Billy felt pretty sure, from the course taken by the lieutenant, of the point for which Crosscut was making. It was a ford of the Rio Grande that was a gateway to a forbidding region in Mexican territory.

He got his horse in readiness without delay, and, mounting, sought the trail in the valley made by the two horses.

He found the trailing easy for a while,

and rode along at a lively canter, keeping a sharp lookout ahead lest he should ride into a trap.

He realized how easy it would be for Crosscut to ambush him, if warned, and kill him.

On reaching the ford of the Rio Grande, which he approached with great caution, he perceived, by the hoof-prints in the mud and sand, that Crosscut and the girl had passed only a few minutes before.

He saw, too, that Crosscut was not in such a hurry as he had been. He had permitted the horses to stop and drink, as the trampling in one place showed.

The only weapon which Brazos Billy had, in addition to the small pistol already mentioned, was a long riata, or rope, that he had been fortunate enough to secure when he took the horse on which he was now mounted.

After crossing the river he got this rope in readiness, and also placed the pistol where he could put his fingers on it at a moment's notice.

He knew that an encounter with Crosscut was imminent, and, aware how great was the danger now of an ambush, he increased his care.

The two horses he was trailing made another change of direction after the Rio Grande was passed, and sought a ledgy, rocky country that left scarcely a trace of their hoof-marks.

Brazos Billy was now forced to exercise all his skill. He did not know what further point Crosscut was aiming for, and was able to continue the pursuit only by a constant watching of the faint hoof-prints.

At one point his heart was given a bound by the sight of a piece of cloth. He recognized it as a piece of Lizzie Benson's dress, which she had evidently torn off and let fall there to guide any one who might follow them.

Whenever the trail grew faint and almost impossible to follow because of the rocks, there he found other pieces of cloth—small bits that must have been torn off very carefully and dropped when Crosscut's attention was diverted.

"Who'd have thought it of her!" was Brazos Billy's jubilant exclamation. "She's as smart as an Indian."

Brazos Billy knew he was falling behind in the race, for he could go but slowly. A half hour was consumed in covering less than a mile.

But he nevertheless went on and on, filled with a stern determination.

He half expected that Rio Grande Rob would follow him, and so he made his own trail as wide and plain almost as a wagon road.

The sun was more than two hours high when he began to feel sure that he was again drawing near Crosscut and the girl.

Then he heard the neigh of a horse, and was certain of it.

Instantly, when that neigh sounded, he reached forward and thrust his big sombrero over his horse's mouth, so disconcerting it that it did not reply to the sound.

He knew he could go no further on horseback without risking discovery. He was pretty sure Crosscut had reached the end, for the time being, of his long journey.

So he secreted his horse not far away, and then stole forward afoot, taking with him the riata, which he carried in his right hand ready for instant use, holding the little pistol in his left.

In a few minutes he came in sight of the entrance of a cave or rock tunnel, and in that entrance he beheld the man and the girl, who were both standing on the ground.

Their horses were at their sides, and

Crosscut was fastening them by their reins to the branches of a mesquite.

Even as Billy looked, Crosscut and the girl disappeared in the rock opening.

With every muscle strained and every nerve taut, Brazos Billy slipped from his place of concealment and hurried without delay to the point where he had seen them disappear.

He was resolved to capture Crosscut at the risk of his life.

When he gained the opening and cautiously looked in, he saw Crosscut standing only a few feet away, harshly addressing the girl, who had sank down exhausted, and who was bitterly crying.

In his words and voice Crosscut showed no more feeling than a stone, and, observing this, Brazos Billy fairly ground his teeth.

Loosing the lariat and dropping it for a throw, Brazos Billy hurled it, with quick precision, straight at the head of the dastardly lieutenant.

It flew as true as a bullet. The noose dropped over Crosscut's head, where it tightened, and then, Brazos Billy giving a mighty surge on the rope, Crosscut was dragged from his feet and fell sprawling and bruised on the rocks.

Before he fairly realized what had befallen him, Brazos Billy leaped through the opening, and, drawing the small revolver, presented it and commanded his instant surrender.

If Brazos Billy expected such a man as Crosscut to give up his liberty without a struggle, however, he was doomed to disappointment.

With a fierce oath Crosscut threw the rope off his neck; then, jumping to his feet, he knocked the pistol aside and tried to strike Brazos Billy to the ground with a blow of his fist.

Billy evaded the lieutenant's blow, and, rushing in, the two closed and fell to the earth in a struggling and writhing heap.

Crosscut tried to get at a knife that he carried in a sheath on his right hip, but Billy clung to him so tenaciously he could not.

By this time Lizzie Benson had somewhat recovered her presence of mind, and began striking Crosscut with a stick.

It was just the assistance Billy needed, without which he might have suffered defeat.

It enabled him to shift his position and close, with the tenacity of a bull-dog's jaws, his grip on Crosscut's throat.

After that the battle was practically decided.

Though Crosscut wriggled and writhed with all his might, he wriggled and writhed in vain. He could not shake that grip, and, gradually, as the fingers tightened, his muscles relaxed.

Brazos Billy was on top of him in the same instant, and began to wrap his arms and legs in the folds of the riata.

CHAPTER XX. CONCLUSION.

Brazos Billy had no sooner secured Lieutenant Crosscut than human forms darkened the entrance, and two of the Firebrands, who had escaped from the fight with the troopers, came hurrying in.

They halted, and, then taking in the situation, ran forward, fingering their revolvers.

Brazos Billy put Lizzie Benson behind him and snatched out the little revolver.

"Run!" he whispered. "Run, while I hold them off."

"Don't let them get away!" Crosscut screamed, as he saw the girl hurry toward the other entrance.

He tried to rise, but fell back, and, torn by an uncontrollable rage, he fairly rolled and writhed on the ground.

Brazos Billy backed away from him, and from the Firebrands, who were coming on, keeping his body interposed between these enemies and the retreating girl.

Then, taking advantage of a spur of rock, he darted behind it, and ran after Lizzie Benson as fast as his legs would carry him.

He was brought to a halt by a voice that cried:

"Ho, there! I onct knowed a feller that—"

"By the great stone nose of my grandpappy!" Billy exclaimed, as he heard the words and saw Bob Roundtree standing before him.

Lizzie Benson had fled to Roundtree's side for safety.

"Take that there hoss and git away frum hyer with this bit of calico, will ye!" Roundtree urged, moving toward the entrance. "I'll look after them chaps in there. Crosscut can't git away, fer there's a wheen o' soldiers right over the bluff."

He put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill blast, that had evidently been previously agreed on as a signal, and Billy heard the low commands of some officer and the trampling of the feet of horses.

"Slide!" begged Roundtree. "We've got the chaps corralled that's in there. You look out fer the girl, an' we'll look out fer them!"

Billy was already obeying his orders, exceedingly thankful that Roundtree had arrived with a body of troopers at so opportune a time.

Roundtree had fallen in with the troopers, who were pursuing the small remnant of Firebrands. Only a few moments before meeting them he had read the message left for him by the Brazos Boy in the cleft stick, and had set out to follow.

Then he had offered his services as guide to the troopers, and had led them swiftly along the broad trail which Billy had left.

From these troopers Roundtree had learned of the remarkable occurrences known to the reader, for Captain Marchmont had recovered from the cowardly blow dealt him by Crosscut and had made public Crosscut's treasonable perfidy and dastardly course of action.

Crosscut and the two Firebrands were surrounded in the rock tunnel. They made a fight there, and one of them fell, when Crosscut and the other surrendered.

It was discovered afterward that border bandits, who had no connection with the Firebrands, had burned Brace Benson's house, and that they did it to gain possession of the money which they had somehow found out was there.

The meeting between father and daughter, so long separated, was very touching.

Bessie Marchmont found not only a father, of whom she could be justly proud, but a brother, also, whom she could ardently love, in the manly little fellow mentioned in these pages, who was the captain's son by a second wife.

As for Brazos Billy and Bob Roundtree, they were made happy by the destruction of the band of Rough Riders, and by the accomplishment of running down and bringing to merited punishment that most detestable of scoundrels, Lieutenant Crosscut.

And Brazos Billy was made even more than happy by the promise given him by the girl he had known as Lizzie Benson that she would one day become his wife.

THE END.

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